



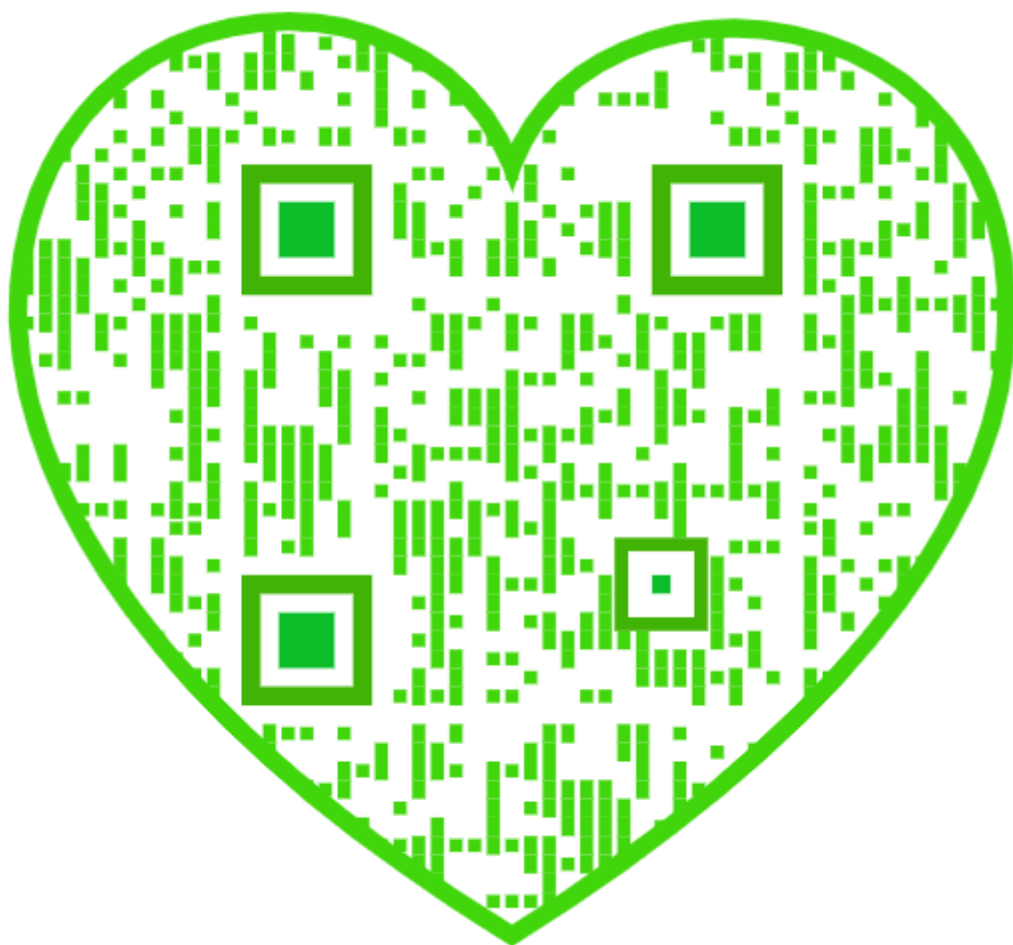
4

Death-Shrouded
Priestess of a
Ruined Land

Story
Isle Osaki

Art
Tam-U

Full clearing
Another World
under a
GODDESS
with **Zero Believers**





4

Death-Shrouded
Priestess of a
Ruined Land

Story
Isle Osaki

Art
Tam-U

Full clearing
Another World
under a
GODDESS
with **Zero Believers**

4 death-shrouded priestess of a ruined land

C O N T E N T S

Prologue	<i>The Story of a Princess and Her Knight</i>
Chapter 1	<i>Makoto Takatsuki Heads for Highland</i>
Chapter 2	<i>Makoto Takatsuki Reunites with the Grandsage</i>
Chapter 3	<i>Makoto Takatsuki Explores the Capital</i>
Chapter 4	<i>Makoto Takatsuki Takes His Goddess's Advice</i>
Chapter 5	<i>Makoto Takatsuki Is Called to Highland Castle</i>
Chapter 6	<i>Makoto Takatsuki Meets the Priestess of the Moon</i>
Chapter 7	<i>Makoto Takatsuki Guards the Capital</i>
Chapter 8	<i>Makoto Takatsuki Realizes His Own Power</i>
Epilogue	<i>Under the Millennium Cherry Trees</i>



Prologue: The Story of a Princess and Her Knight

Once upon a time, in a certain country, there lived a beautiful princess and a gallant knight.

One day, a wicked witch came from the east and used her evil magic to control the king and ministers. The princess, who was in line to become the future queen, was driven from the country by the witch. Her only companion was her childhood friend, a young knight.

The princess and her knight set out on a journey to take back their home. Through much effort, they gathered many allies and eventually regained the country from the wicked witch.

However, in the battle with the witch, the knight suffered a mortal wound.

“Your Highness, it was a pleasure to serve you,” he said before all of his life energy was expended on protecting the princess.

And thus, the knight became the country’s hero...



Back in Macallan, when our party had just been Lucy and me, I remembered her telling me that story.

“Isn’t that wonderful?!” she asked. “It’s the tale of a princess and her knight!”

“Eh, I don’t know about that... I mean, he died, didn’t he?”

It was a sad ending, and I much preferred happy ones.

“He didn’t. The story makes it seem that way, but there’re other theories... Some people say that the actual princess and knight grew old together and then divorced, or that he got taken in by a younger woman.”

“How’s that any better?!” *Where’s the aspiration and hope?!*

“Man, I want a knight to protect me...” Lucy said, flicking her gaze my way.

Before answering, I sighed and surveyed our surroundings. “And what would

they be protecting you *from*?”

The whole area was covered in craters thanks to Lucy’s Meteo Rain, along with the corpses of any monsters that were unfortunate enough to be caught in the destruction.

“B-But you protected me from a big ogre, didn’t you?!”

“Oh, yeah, I guess so.”

This memory seemed distant from our present circumstances. Now, *Lucy* was one of the most powerful mages in Macallan. If anything, she’d be the one protecting me.

“You’re not playing along today,” Lucy complained. “Right! Let’s go have a drink!”

I smiled ruefully at her as she grabbed onto me, and I put my arm around her shoulders. She had pretty slender shoulders actually... A knight protecting her, huh? It was definitely a nice thought.

First, I’d have to get strong enough to defend my friends.

Then, I’d save Noah.

That was my pledge. I glanced around at the water elementals that were drifting through the air...and I also looked at Lucy’s face.

Chapter 1: Makoto Takatsuki Heads for Highland

Once we left the Habhain Islands, we headed for Highland's capital—Symphonia—via airship.

The countryside spread out beneath us, and as I basked in the pleasant wind, my mind was filled with thoughts of the as-yet-unseen country... Well, not really. I was still thinking about the Seafloor Temple and the divine beast Leviathan.

How do I even deal with that monster...?

No matter how much I pondered it, nothing came to mind. That didn't mean I'd give up, though. If anything, seeing a *real* final boss had made my sinking motivation skyrocket.

Makoto, you know the Great Demon Lord comes first, right? Noah said in my mind.

Yeah, I know that.

As I was chatting with my goddess, someone came up to me from behind. Because of my *RPG Player* skill, I was able to view my surroundings from a 360-degree perspective—I used this to see who was approaching me and then turned to greet the person before she could speak.

"What's wrong, Princess Sophia?"

"Do you have eyes in the back of your head?" she asked. "No matter. Have you memorized the important people in Highland?"

She'd discussed a lot of the particulars with me yesterday.

"Uh, well... There are the four great noble families. I have to avoid going against them, right?" I asked. Thinking back to our conversation, I seemed to remember that there was the Roland family from the east, the Whitehouses from the west, the Baileys from the south, and the Ballantines from the north.

Those four families, along with the royal family, were called the five Sacred

Nobles, and the country as a whole revolved around them.

“While this goes without saying for the Highland family, each of the other four has greater riches and military might than even our own royal family.”

“More than the Roses family?” I asked. That was crazy. Napkin math indicated that Highland would be roughly five times stronger than Roses.

“Militarily, Roses is somewhat of a vassal state of Highland...” Prince Leonardo added from behind his sister.

“Leo, you should do something about that pessimism,” Princess Sophia answered, keeping a firm demeanor. “We’ll look them in the eyes one day.”

Still...I felt kind of bad for the struggles of a small nation in diplomatic straits... And since I was a hero of that country, it probably meant that there was a lot of turmoil ahead.

Oh, are you only just realizing? I heard Noah ask.

Yup, seems so... Oh well. I’d manage somehow.

“Hero Makoto, are you unnerved as well?”

“No, not really,” I answered. It didn’t bother me.

“You need not worry,” said the princess, though it felt more like she was telling herself rather than me.

Half a day later, the airship was slowly gliding through a reddening sky.

“Good job, old-timer,” I said to Princess Sophia’s bodyguard as I handed him a drink from the galley.

He refused, as serious as ever. “Oh, Hero. Thank you, but I’m on duty.”

“Here you go, everyone. Good work!” Lucy called.

Immediately after, Sasa added, “They’re ice cold!”

The two of them handed out the drinks, plus some snacks, to the other knights. Fujiyan had said that work was probably tiring for the knights, so he’d provided a little pick-me-up. He was always thoughtful.

“Princess Sophia said you should enjoy yourselves,” I told the bodyguard.

“Hmm... Well in that case...” he took the drink and brought it to his mouth, but then began spluttering. “Th-This is alcohol!”

“Yup, bottoms up!”

“H-Hey! I’m on duty—”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s fine.” I leaned on the railing and sipped at my own juice-cut booze. After a few moments, I turned to him. “By the way, there was something I wanted to ask you.”

“What is it?” he inquired, eventually giving up on abstaining.

“This afternoon, Prince Leonardo mentioned that Roses was like a vassal state of Highland in terms of military strength. I wanted to hear a bit more detail.”

“Well...” he began, his face darkening. “It’s true. We are a weak country in terms of military might. Roses has relied on Highland for aid on several occasions, including defeating both the blight dragons in Labyrinthos and past rebellions brought about by cambions... For our nation’s defense, we do indeed depend on them.”

“I see,” I answered after a pause.

“Roses’s army numbers perhaps thirty thousand at most. Our only hero was Prince Leonardo...and now we have you. But in comparison, Highland has over *three hundred thousand* men and *five* heroes.”

Yikes, that was some difference. It felt almost like the gap between my stats and those of my classmates... Actually, there was more of a difference there. It also brought to mind the relationship between Japan and...another country...but let’s not get any further into that.

Just then, Lucy and Sasa walked over, and they spoke one after another.

“We’re done, Makoto.”

“Takatsuki, what’re you talking about?”

“Oh, just about how things are tough no matter what world you’re in,” I answered.

The two of them looked quizzically at me. My thoughts roamed to the future as I ruminated on a country I'd never seen. I let out a sigh.

Several days later, a huge walled city stretched out before us.

"So that's Symphonia? That's where Saki and the others are!" Sasa cheered.

"It's the most prosperous city on the continent..." Lucy added. "I've never been here before!"

Both of them were excited. Of course, so was I.

"So the city's surrounded by both the sea and a river," I muttered to myself.

Symphonia was located near a vast river mouth that fed into the ocean, similar to Manhattan in America. There was a huge statue made of white stone that sat in front of the castle gates.

"Fujiyan, what's that?" I asked.

"A statue of Abel the Savior."

"Whew, it's huge."

The statue depicted a dashing swordsman atop a massive pedestal, and his right hand held a sword aloft. The pose...

"It looks like the Statue of Liberty," I commented.

Fujiyan agreed. "I thought much the same when I first saw it."

It felt like we were on some kind of school trip or something, and my excitement welled up. We'd have to look around.

"What is the meaning of this?!" I heard the bodyguard yell. "This is the princess of Roses, Princess Sophia herself!" He'd apparently gotten into some form of dispute with the gatekeepers.

"A vicious criminal is currently on the loose," responded one of the gate guards, "so security in and out of the city has been strengthened. Even a member of a royal family must be inspected."

That didn't sound good.

“Fujiyan, is he talking about a cambion?” I asked, remembering that Highland’s capital was the Snake Sect’s next target.

“Hmm...give me but a moment,” he answered before examining the guards. He was probably using his *Mind Reading* skill. “No... It would seem that the escapee is the Priestess of the Moon.”

“There’s a criminal priestess?” I asked after a moment. How did that work?

“I thought I had already mentioned it. Laphroaig’s priestess is cursed. She is said to be the reincarnation of the Witch of Calamity, who betrayed mankind a thousand years ago. The current moon priestess was confined in preparation for the Great Demon Lord’s revival, but it seems she has escaped.”

“Punished for something your ancestor did...”

“At any rate,” Fujiyan continued, “the current priestess was apparently leading the criminals and cambions of Laphroaig, so the Soleil Knights are taking preemptive action.”

“That’s disturbing,” I replied with a sigh. Still, I suppose it didn’t have anything to do with me.

Before long, the inspection was over, and we got to pass through the huge gates. We stepped out onto a road overflowing with people. Looming up behind the crowd was a pair of large buildings that didn’t seem to fit the vibe of the rest of this world.

“The one on the right is the largest building on this continent, Highland Castle,” Princess Sophia explained.

The normal houses were almost all two-story buildings. Even the tallest were only three stories. But the castle felt almost on par with the skyscrapers on Earth... It was *that* imposing. Even though it was situated in the distance, it looked like a bird rearing up and spreading its wings. Roses Castle was beautiful, but Highland Castle was overwhelming.

“The building to the left is the Cathedral of Anna the Holy Mother,” Chris added, picking up the thread of Sophia’s explanation.

The cathedral had a solemn presence that was different from the castle. It

was somewhat similar in appearance to the Sagrada Familia that I'd seen on TV once—a church with countless steeples that seemed to almost pierce up into the heavens.

“King Highland lives within the castle and the pope's seat is in the cathedral. The two of them stand at the top of this city,” said Fujiyan.

That seemed a little unusual. There were two people in the top spot?

“We can save the details for later. First, we should secure lodging for tonight,” Fujiyan decided. He then took the lead.

Before we could wander any farther, Princess Sophia stopped our procession. “Excuse us...this is where we part ways.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Fujiyan. “My apologies. The two of you will be staying within the first district, I presume.”

“Indeed, and you will be housed within the third. Hero Makoto, we shall see you later,” she said with a smile. Then she and the prince went off with their guards in another direction.

I guess they'll be staying elsewhere.

“We all got here together, so we could have stayed together,” I pointed out.

“My esteemed Tackie, the districts in the capital are segregated by one's standing,” explained Fujiyan.

He followed up the brief explanation with a more detailed one: The first district was for royals, the second for clergymen, the third for nobles, and the fourth through sixth were for human commoners. The seventh and eighth were for beastmen, elves, dwarves, and other such demi-humans.

The ninth...was for those of even lower standing.

“So since you're a noble now, we're in the third district?” I asked.

“Precisely.”

“Hmph.”

What a strict city.

“Hey, look, look.”

“Wow, so many shops!”

Despite that, Lucy and Sasa were both goggling at the various stores.

“Fujiyan, what was the district just after the gates?”

“The sixth. The closer to the castle you get, the higher standing the inhabitants have.”

That made sense—the seventh and below were distanced from the castle.

In that way, the layout was fairly similar to Horn. However, the main street didn’t just continue straight to the castle but was interspersed with several huge gates. They were probably separating each district...?

We all started walking.

“Whoops, ’scuse me,” I apologized as I almost bumped into someone. There were a lot of people around, but there was something off...

“There are barely any elves or beastmen here,” Sasa murmured, putting my unease into words. She was right... Unlike in Macallan, everyone here was human. I couldn’t see a single other race.

“This is the sixth district, so it’s a human town,” Lucy replied absently.

“Standing is everything in Highland’h...” Nina said, hunching over slightly.

“Nina, you don’t need to worry,” Chris said, patting her on the back. “Hold your head high.”

“Might I suggest we find our lodging first?” Fujiyan said to me.

“Yeah, it’s been a long trip. Let’s take a break in the inn.”

There seemed to be a lot going on in this country. With those thoughts on our minds, we passed through the first gate and on to the next district.

“The water is perfect.” Fujiyan sighed.

“I love a big bath,” I agreed.

We’d all headed for the communal baths in the inn as soon as we’d arrived. It was the perfect thing to recover after a long journey. They weren’t mixed baths,

of course, so both Lucy and Sasa weren't here.

"So Highland does this sort of thing too."

"Actually, no," Fujiyan commented. "Sharing a bath is not part of the country's culture. As far as I am aware, this is the only inn with such facilities."

That was Fujiyan, all right... He knew all the best places.

"This is wonderful!" exclaimed Prince Leonardo. He'd come by despite his lodging being in the first district. "So in the other world, everyone shares a bath like this?!"

As for the princess, she'd immediately gone to offer her greetings at the castle. Her work was never-ending...

The prince had been left at a loose end while she did, so he'd come to hang out with us. We'd invited his guards in as well, but they had refused, unable to consider sharing a bath with the prince like that.

"Makoto, let's go to the castle together tomorrow," Prince Leonardo suggested, slipping through the water toward me. "It's your first time here, right?"

I couldn't see anything but steam and water from his shoulders down. His good looks and unbroken voice meant that he still seemed like a beautiful girl.



“Makoto?” he asked, tilting his head.

S-So close! Wait! Hang on! He’s a guy!

I pulled my eyes away and looked over at Fujiyan, who swallowed tightly. He was frozen stiff.

Come on, you’re going to have two wives, aren’t you? You still with us?

“Heeeeyyy, Fujiyan,” I called.

“Bwah! What on earth?!”

Guess he’d had a similar reaction to Prince Leonardo.

Makoto... I heard from Noah. Do guys get your heart racing more than girls?

Th-They don’t!

I activated *Calm Mind*. Come on, calm!

“Thank you, Prince,” I said after a moment. “I’d appreciate you showing us around tomorrow. It looks like Highland has a separate castle and church, unlike Horn.”

“That’s right. It’s because Highland is a secular nation.”

“Well spotted, my friend!” Fujiyan joined in. “It has to do with the founding of the country itself. Are you aware of Highland’s founder?”

“Come on, Fujiyan, don’t make fun of me,” I answered. I’d heard that trivia enough times to get sick of it back at the Water Temple. “It was Abel, right?”

Even I knew that!

“Precisely. However, did you know that the Highland family is not descended from him?”

“Huh?” What’s this, some mystery novel?

“Abel the Savior left Highland after founding it, so the first monarch was Anna the Holy Mother.”

“Anna...was the sun goddess’s priestess, and one of his companions, right?”

“Indeed. She was also the first pope of said goddess’s church.”

“The first pope...” That must tie in with the conversation from earlier.

“The royal family are her descendants, and the pope’s position in the church has been hereditary for generations.”

That certainly would give both of them a lot of influence... “So that’s why you said they’re both at the head of the country,” I reasoned.

“The king leads the country, but they cannot give an order to the pope. The two are completely independent of each other,” Prince Leonardo explained.

“The cathedral is regarded as extraterritorial,” warned Fujiyan. “If you are interested, I ask that you remain cautious.”

Nope, not touching that with a barge pole. I was a disciple of an old goddess (wicked deity), so going to the foremost place of Sacred Deity faith on the continent was too scary for my blood.

“Apparently, their greatest wish is to assimilate the blood of Abel the Savior into the royal family,” Fujiyan said.

“Nah...that ain’t happening.” I mean, Abel was alive a millennium ago...

Fujiyan smirked though, presumably reading my mind. “It is said that his reincarnation has recently appeared.”

“You can’t mean...”

“Of course. The Hero of Light, Sir Sakurai.”

“Uh...” Sakurai had come from another world, though, so surely that meant he wasn’t the savior reborn?

“After a thousand years, another person with the *Hero of Light* skill appeared... It was incredible when everyone found out—the country was in uproar.” Prince Leonardo said this with a distant look as if remembering it.

Man...Sakurai had ended up a real big shot. Though, I kinda felt for him and his plight of being the most important person in such a huge country. He’d always been responsible, so I was sure he was doing his best to live up to the title.

“The moment he appeared, the line of succession changed from the first

prince to the second daughter, Princess Noelle,” said Fujiyan.

“The *second*?” I asked.

“The eldest had already married. In addition to being a priestess, Princess Noelle is said to be the reincarnation of Anna the Holy Mother. The whole country wishes to see those two wed.”

Replicating the legend from a thousand years ago. What a role Sakurai’s been stuck with...

“He has not got it easy...” Fujiyan commented.

“You got that right...” I agreed.

He’d been at a school desk the same as us, and now he was standing right up there.

“I’m feeling a bit light-headed,” I said after a while in the bath. “Shall we get out?”

“Would you be averse to a nightcap?” Fujiyan asked.

“Sounds good.”

Prince Leonardo chimed in. “Could I join you as well?”

“Of course,” I told him, “but no alcohol for you.”

“Aww, just a little?”

Nope. Princess Sophia would kill me.

We then joined up with Sasa, Lucy, Nina, and Chris for a meal. As the night went on, Princess Sophia arrived with a tired face. We invited her for some tea, but she refused and left, saying she had an early morning for work. She had a hard job...

The next day, Prince Leonardo guided us to the castle.

Fujiyan and Nina apparently had merchant work to do, so it was just Lucy, Sasa, and me. The princess was also coming, but separately for other work.

The castle had been imposing from a distance but was even more so up close.

It was constructed using plain stones, but just stone probably wouldn't be able to maintain that height, so it likely used magic for support. There were lots of knights inside the castle, each with their own crest engraved on their armor.

"There are a bunch of knights here," I commented.

"The Hero of Light is going to be inaugurated as a leader of the Soleil Knights soon, so knights from all five of the Sacred Noble families are here," the prince explained.

The five Sacred Nobles referred to the five families that led the country: the Roland family, the Whitehouse family, the Baileys family, and the Ballantine family. All of them were people we couldn't hope to stand against.

"Wasn't Sakurai already their leader?" When he'd left the Water Temple, it had sounded like that was pretty much decided.

"He had the same skill as the legendary savior, so there was a large movement to treat him as such, but the opposition was also firmly rooted," Prince Leonardo explained.

"To be specific, objections came from the Roland family—supported by the first prince—and the Whitehouse family—supported by the second," Lucy said. Apparently, this was common knowledge.

"Sakurai was the acting leader, but his recent achievement of defeating two blight dragons saw him recognized officially as leader of the seventh division."

"Oh, pretty impressive," I commented.

In response to my idle words, Sasa protested. "Wait, weren't you involved too?!"

"I mean, I guess so." Plenty of stuff had happened since then... I barely remembered.

"You managed to forget blight monsters?!"

"Makoto, they're the natural enemies of mankind..."

Lucy and Prince Leonardo were aghast as well.

"Ah, that reminds me," I said, turning to the prince. "I have a favor to ask

you.”

“Oh, what is it?”

“Can you make sure all the knights learn *Serenity*?” I asked him. “The blight monsters are constantly using fear and charm skills—that’s what makes them such a pain. Without them though, they’re weak.”

I’d only fought against blight monsters twice, but they’d all gone down without much trouble.

“Disregarding that opinion, combating their mental attacks is important! I’ll start considering it immediately.”

He’s such a good kid.

Prince Leonardo kept showing us around for a while longer. Highland Castle was too big to see in a day, though. As we arrived in an area about the size of a soccer field, the prince suggested we take a rest.

There were knights, mages, clerics, and archers all training around the area, with several stalls set up on the edges that seemed to be selling food.

“This is a training ground for the Soleil Knights, but any soldier can use it. Let’s get some lunch,” Prince Leonardo suggested.

“Wait? I’m a soldier?!” I exclaimed. That was out of the blue!

“Becoming a State-Authorized Hero provides an equivalent rank to general in the army. With that said, you are not particularly affiliated with the army. It’s just organizational.”

“They explained that in the ceremony,” Lucy chastised, looking disappointed at me. “Weren’t you listening?”

“He was too out of it,” Sasa interjected.

Don’t tell them that! Though honestly, I’d been so excited that all the extra stuff had gone in one ear and out the other.

Anyway, we soon headed cheerily for the food stalls. I looked around and saw a lot of people sparring with wooden swords or training combat magic.

Suddenly, I realized...there were water elementals here.

There hadn't been any in Roses Castle, but I suppose the lack of religion in Highland made the difference. Or maybe it was because we were so close to the sea. Either way, there was no better feeling than having my lifeline of elementals.

While I was considering that, an aggressive voice stopped me. "Halt right there. Are you Roses's hero?"

Prince Leonardo shuddered at the sound, his shoulders quivering. "L-Let's go, Makoto."

"Oi, what's the big idea?" demanded the sharp-eyed knight wearing golden armor. His hair was blond and his eyes were blue. The decoration on his armor made him seem high-ranked, if ill-mannered. "Oi oi oi, don't clam up. Out with it, kid!" And he had a verbal tic of saying "oi"...

"Who is he?" I muttered to the prince, who was behind me and casting his head down.

"Highland's Hero of Lightning, Sir Gerald."

"*Sir?* That's *Lord* to you! Don't think some no-name hero can act like an equal to me!"

What on earth? This guy was acting like some rural yobbo. Did he not have manners?

"I don't think you need to go that far," I interjected, trying to mediate.

"Trash like you should keep its mouth shut," the hero said, directing a harsh gaze my way. Calling me trash was a bit much...

"Takatsuki's a hero of Roses," Sasa defended.

"He's defeated blight monsters," Lucy added.

"Hero...Makoto..." the man murmured, his expression changing. "You're an otherworld hero?"

"Yes," I answered, "though I was only just appointed."

His expression sharpened even more. "C'mere," he demanded.

Was he trying to be some gangster?! I mean...I guess he's a hero...?

“Wh-What?” I stuttered but followed.

He didn’t answer and instead flung a wooden sword in front of me. “Let’s go a round. I’ll take it easy on you.”

There was a sadistic smile on his face. Man, I had a bad feeling about this.

“Makoto! You can’t!” the prince yelled. “He has a habit of harassing people he doesn’t like!” To be honest, that’s about what I’d figured.

“Shut up, scrub. It’s just a spar! Only a coward wouldn’t do it! When I was your age, I’d already hunted hundreds of monsters and dragons. Then there’s you, hiding away at home when a blight monster appears in a dungeon in your own country!”

“Guh...” Prince Leonardo grunted in frustration.

That made sense, I guess. I’d thought it was the norm for Prince Leonardo to not go to the dungeons due to his youth, but apparently, this other hero had been doing so since he was nine. Did this world have labor laws? It seemed not.

“Oi, what’s the hold-up? Heroes are signs of their country’s might. You’re not going to turn me down, are you?” Gerald taunted. “Or does that whore of a mage or her flat-chested friend want to take me on instead? Oh, are they stronger than you?”

You bastard... I mean, they are, but still. I didn’t want to hear him talk about them like that.

“It’s okay, Takatsuki, I’ll take him on,” Sasa offered. Angry motivation: clear.

“I can pop him with a Meteo if you like!” Lucy was joining in too! Well, she also had a short temper.

“Now, now,” I said reasonably. “I can take you on just fine, right?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying, trash. Come get some.”

This was supposed to be the biggest city on the continent... The standards seemed a little low.

“I’m sorry, Makoto... This is my fault,” the prince apologized.

“What are you on about? He’s the one in the wrong,” I replied.

“He used to be Highland’s leading hero, then the Hero of Light appeared from another world and he lost his position,” the prince explained. “That’s why he’s like this now. Don’t go too far...”

“Oh...I see...”

So Gerald had lost his place to Sakurai. Poor him. That was no reason to get all aggressive with a kid, though. The hero had his arms folded as he waited in the center of the arena.

So we were doing this in the middle of everyone? *Man, we’ll stand out.* The other warriors were all looking on curiously.

Ugh, I don’t wanna, I thought as I walked slowly over. I just wanted to go home.

“I am the Hero of Lightning, Gerald Ballantine,” he declared as he flourished the wooden sword.

Gah?! Weren’t they the family I was supposed to avoid standing against?

The Ballantines were one of the five Sacred Noble families, on the same level as royalty... I’d thought he seemed a bit too at ease being so rude to the prince... Maybe I shouldn’t be picking this fight.

“Uh, I’m Makoto Takatsuki, Roses’s State-Authorized Hero...”

Introducing myself was good manners...probably. I borrowed one of the staves in the area.

“A mage then...with that pitiful mana. And you call yourself a hero,” Gerald mocked. “Now, begin!”

There was barely a signal before he launched forward.

H-He vanished?! *Dodge!*

I managed to avoid the attack by a hair’s breadth, though the ominous whipping sound of air rushing past my ear was all I heard. This was him holding back?

“You dodge like a turtle!”

“Gah!”

There was a sharp pain in my shoulder. *Hadn't I dodged it?!*

"It's over!"

He was attacking again, *crap!*

Water Magic: Ice Needle.

"You're using what?!" taunted Gerald. "That's trash magic!"

He weaved around the countless needles that were aimed at his eyes. That was one of my trump cards... I remembered that Sasa had done the same, so I guess that spell wasn't very effective once the level difference was big enough.

"Trash magic and trash attacks."

I could barely see Gerald's strikes! Guess I just had to avoid his sword blows, even if I took other hits.

"Guh!" He attacked just after my evasion again, this time with a kick to the back.

D-Dodge! Dodge! Dodge!

"This is pathetic. Just surrender! You shouldn't call yourself a hero!"

Shut up already! My skill should let me dodge, but I was getting more and more wounds. It was supposed to be a wooden sword, but it felt like a metal one. Was that the effect of coating a weapon in aura?

"Oi, oi, I'll finish it in a blow. You should at least make me use some spellsword skills!"

The bastard! I just tried a *Fog* spell for lack of any other options.

"C'mon!" His bellow created a blast of wind that blew the mist away. My strategy hadn't even bought me any time...

"Hah!" He was now moving faster than before.

It felt like an explosion went off next to me and I went flying. I must have bitten my tongue because I could taste blood, and I was barely able to hold down my vomit.

Another hit like that and I'll pass out...

My three friends all yelled for me and raced over.

“Knock it off already! Makoto’s a mage!” Lucy yelled at Gerald.

“It’s okay, Lu. I’ll take him on.”

“Makoto...I’ll fight with you.”

Lucy and Sasa both sounded angry as they stood between us.

“Calm down, you three. I’m fine at the moment.” Honestly, my body was screaming and my legs were shaking. I was dizzy, but I managed to stand.

“You’re a moron,” said the hero disdainfully.

“This is bad, isn’t it?” someone commented from the sidelines.

“Lord Gerald causes so many injuries when he goes too far...”

“He gets carried away in training.”

“That’s a hero from Roses... This is going to be a problem...”

“Someone go get Princess Noelle.”

“We went ages ago!”

I could hear the various voices. So this was common... Regardless, I’d prefer to keep the hot-bloodedness on the down-low.

“Oi, what gives? I’ll take you all on, bring it.” The Hero of Lightning, Gerald... He sure was cocky, and he was supposed to be a hero of Highland.

“You women should leave him and come with me. I’ll take *good care* of you.”

“Who would...”

“Disgusting.”

Lucy and Sasa mocked him.

“Nah, I’ll fight alone.” I stood and pushed forward past them.

“You can’t, Takatsuki!”

“Come on! Let’s fight together.”

“It’s fine,” I told them, smiling. They seemed on the verge of tears. But Gerald wasn’t getting away with making them look like that. Suddenly, several more

people arrived.

“Takatsuki! Are you okay?!”

“Hero Makoto! Are you safe?!”

I was holding back the pain in my body as Sakurai and Princess Sophia arrived.

“Gerald! Stop this now!” Princess Noelle demanded.

“Noelle’s here...” the man in question muttered.

“What were you thinking?” she asked. “He is a hero of Roses! Did you presume that this would be allowed?!”

“Shut it. It’s just a spar—butt out.”

Those are some brass ones... Princess Noelle was the first in line for the throne, so she should be the most influential person on the western continent...and he thought he could get away with speaking to her like that? Still, there was something more important.

“Princess Noelle, I agree with him,” I said. “This is a spar, so could we finish it?”

“What are you saying?!” Princess Sophia yelled.

“Takatsuki...” Sakurai murmured worriedly. Sorry about that, really.

“Sir Makoto, you understand that it will be stopped if this goes too far?” asked Princess Noelle with a serious look.

“I do, thank you,” I told her.

I turned to face the Hero of Lightning again. Gerald Ballantine was a hero of Highland and had the strength to prove it. His aura was sparking from his body and he seemed as threatening as the dragon I’d encountered in Labyrinthos. He was as strong or stronger than Sasa in martial arts... I’d have no chance of facing him head-on.

It’s kinda surprising though... Compared to Leviathan...he ain’t all that. I looked down on everyone using my RPG Player skill. He’s so small. So’s everyone, compared to that beast.

Would I ever manage to rescue Noah from the Seafloor Temple if I slacked off

here?

Yeah...I was angry.

And I was disappointed in myself. My objective was to beat Leviathan and then rescue Noah from the temple. I had to push through all the obstacles to that goal.

“Come on then, use your dregs of mana,” sneered Gerald.

“I’ll take you up on that,” I answered as I set *Calm Mind* to 0%.

Elementals, give me a hand and beat the crap out of him.

Right!

I was the only one that could hear the elementals’ chorus in response to my anger.

“Eat shit!” Gerald moved instantly, but I’d already called the elementals. Vast quantities of mana gathered, even more than when I’d used *Synchro* with Lucy.

Get him!

Their chorus echoed in my ears. Cutting off my *Calm Mind* had let the water elementals be influenced by my anger, and now they were excited. The countless blue elementals swirled around me, lending me just a bit of their infinite mana.

Water Magic: Grand Cascade!

I let my rage free and cast king rank water magic.

◇ Gerald’s Perspective ◇

“What?!”

Out of nowhere, a huge amount of water appeared. It was like a pond had been upended.

“AH!”

“What the...?!”

“Run!”

The spectators had all started to panic and run away. With a hiss, I coated my practice blade in mana and sliced at the falling water. The mass of water split into two pieces. Damn worthless magic—for a hero like me, it was almost completely lacking in attack power. I pivoted my sword to take the mage down.

“xxxxxx... Yeah, that’s right...xxxxxx.”

The hero from Roses said...something. What was it? Some kind of spell. As he spoke, water started bubbling around us like rapids.

Then, he lifted his right hand.

“Water Magic: Azure Dragon.”

The roiling water formed a massive dragon. It didn’t have wings though, so it looked more similar to the snake-like dragons that lived in the East. It grew, coiling around and around, growing so large that it could put Highland Castle to shame.

The other hero was inside of the beast.

So what? Was he trying to use the dragon for defense?

“Sun Magic: Thunderbolt!” I shouted. My ultra rank magic blasted forward but then glanced off the water dragon. The size of the beast meant that my spell had hardly any effect.

“Tch.” In that case—

“Sun Magic: Thunder Sword.”

—it was time for my spellsword skill.

This attack would see the pointless battle finished. *Thunder Sword* was a legendary skill that had been used by Abel the Savior. My wooden sword shone gold and its composition changed, granting it power that was beyond even a normal magic sword. Now, it didn’t matter what kind of power that hero used—I’d slice through his crappy spell like a hot knife through butter.

“Sir Ryousuke! Shouldn’t you stop him?!”

I could see Noelle shaking the Hero of Light’s shoulder... That pissed me off.

“It’ll be fine. This is Takatsuki, after all,” came the bastard’s response.

What faith did he have in that piddling mage? I’d make sure his precious friend would never walk again... The Hero of Light could just stand and watch me.

“Take that!” I focused a huge amount of lightning mana into the sword in my hand, then leaped into the huge water dragon. That hero was in there somewhere, and while it was dark, I could find him with my skills.

It’s over!

But then, just before my sword reached him...

Water Magic: Abyss.

I shouldn’t have been able to hear his voice underwater, but for some reason, I could.

What?!

Suddenly, my body felt oddly heavy. That coiling, snake-like water he’d summoned was tightening around me.

And yet, I wasn’t fully immobile. *Such a pointless struggle...* This was all he could do? Child’s play. I lifted my sword to swing down on him, but then, I heard an unfamiliar phrase.

Water Magic: Thousand Meter Depth.

Gah!

The pressure bearing down on me multiplied, and it felt like I was covered in lead. But even then, my arms...and my legs...were just able to move.

You little shit! I’ll get rid of the dragon first.

I gathered my mana to start casting, but then...

Water Magic: Two Thousand Meter Depth.

The voice came again, and with it, the surrounding pressure redoubled. My body was immensely heavier and I could hear my bones creaking in protest. I

couldn't breathe and my head was swimming. Soon, my vision started going black as all my senses screamed, "Danger!"

W...Wait... This...is bad.

Water Magic: Three Thousand Meter Depth.

A bone snapped.

AHHHHHHH!

The pain was immense, but I couldn't scream. I just gritted my teeth in the water.

Fu...ck. I'll kill him... I just need to...get out of here...first...

"Water Magic: Four Thousand Meter Depth."

I heard the dispassionate voice again, but before I could parse the meaning, something was crushed with a grinding noise. I couldn't tell whether it was my arm or a leg.

Aa...rgh... St...op...

I couldn't understand. What was happening?

My mind wasn't working. I couldn't think. Well...there was one thing I understood.

At this rate, I'm going...to...die...

"Water Magic: Five Thousand Meter Depth."

My brain refused to comprehend what had happened. My body...

I'm...dyi...

"Takatsuki! That's enough!"

Just before I lost consciousness, I saw a dim figure jump into the water dragon and pull me out. It was that damn Hero of Light...

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

"What?"

In between blinks, I found myself in an empty space...

My goddess's realm.

That was weird... Wasn't I fighting with that Hero of Lightning?

"Makoto, are you with me?"

Oh, there's Noah. I knelt as I always did and gave my greetings.

But...she didn't reply. Uh, what? Just as that realization dawned on me, I looked up, and Noah started smacking my head.

"Stupidstupidstupid! What are you playing at?!"

"Ow, ow. That hurts, Noah." Although honestly, it didn't really.

"Makoto, on your knees!"

"R-Right," I answered. I did as she asked, though I wondered why.

"Do you know why you're here?"

"Uh..." I thought back.

I'd been in some training grounds behind the castle, and I was pretty sure I'd been fighting that Gerald guy... So, if I was here, then that meant...

"I lost?" Oof, that was embarrassing. I'd played it all cool in front of Princess Noelle, but that'd been pointless.

I peeked up to see Noah directing an exasperated look my way.

"Look," she commanded, snapping her fingers. A big screen appeared in the air.

"Makoto! Stay with us!"

"Takatsuki, wake up!"

"Makoto!"

"Hero Makoto... *Healwater.*"

On the screen, I could see that I was laid out flat. Lucy, Sasa, Prince Leonardo, Princess Sophia, and Sakurai were all around me, and the princess was casting healing magic on my prone body.

"Sophie's fixing you," Noah confirmed.

“I’ll have to thank her.”

I couldn’t see any major wounds, but if I’d passed out, then I probably *had* lost. My shoulders slumped, but as they did, Noah pointed at the screen.

“Now look at this,” she said, snapping again. The image on the screen changed, and now I could see...

“Uh... What?”

The Hero of Lightning. His limbs were twisted, bent, and crushed in ways that they certainly shouldn’t have been. W-Was he...

“I-Is he dead?” I asked. Blood was pouring out of him. N-No way. I was a murderer?

Just then, Princess Noelle’s beautiful voice rang out from the screen.

“You, our beloved that art in heaven. Grant us this miracle. *Sun Magic: Revival.*”

Gerald was engulfed in holy light, and his body instantly reverted to the way it had looked at the beginning of our fight. Whoa! That was incredible!

“Good for you,” Noah commented. “You were lucky that Noelle was so close. There aren’t many people on the continent that can use the saint rank *Revival* spell.”

Ph-Phew! That’s great! I’m not a murderer.

“I’ll need to thank her later too. By the way...did I do that...?” I couldn’t recall causing those injuries at all... Weird. I remembered the rest of the fight though.

“You lost control of your elemental magic,” Noah told me, hands on her hips.

“I...lost control?”

“Yup. Ryousuke stopped you.” She snapped her fingers to change the display again. “Take a look.”

A huge mass of water was floating there. That...must be the stuff I’d conjured, right?

“That’s the stupid-huge amount of water you summoned. It would have been enough to swallow the castle whole. It would have flooded the town, would’ve

washed countless people away...if it hadn't been dealt with."

"Wha?" For real? But who was controlling it while I was passed out?

"Look over there."

I peered at the screen and saw someone who looked like a mage wearing a white robe... The Grandsage. *She* was controlling the water?

"Tch...such a bother," I heard the Grandsage gripe. Oof, she was angry. The strongest mage on the continent was muttering to herself as she cleaned up after me.

Before long, the whole mass was gone.

"Thank you, Grandsage," Lucy said to her.

"Tell the elementalist to come visit me when he wakes up," was her only reply before she teleported away. Man, she *really* didn't sound happy... *I'm definitely not looking forward to seeing her—she's gonna tear me apart.*

"You need to thank the people that helped you," Noah scolded, hands still on her hips.

Yeah...I caused a lot of trouble for a lot of people.

"I suppose part of it's my fault," she added with a conflicted smile. "When you used emotions to fuel your elemental magic, you were just doing as I told you. I should have been more careful with my warnings."

"Did I do it wrong?" I asked.

"It ended up like this because you used your rage. With any other emotion, I think your mastery level would allow you to control it. But since rage is the fiercest emotion for people, you managed to crush him."

O-Oh, right... So anger's not one I should use.

"By the way," continued Noah, "why do you think the Sacred Deities hate elemental magic?"

"Uh, where'd that come from?" It was a bit off-topic, wasn't it?

"It's not. When you lose control of elemental magic, it causes so much harm. Just like what happened to you."

“Harm...”

Right, if the Grandsage hadn't been there, I would have caused a massive flood.

“That's why the Soul Books provided by the Sacred Deities' churches have mastery capped at 99. It makes you feel like you aren't progressing, like you'll never see the elementals. The churches are also responsible for the overall impression that elemental magic isn't worth it.”

“Oh, they are...?”

So that was why there were so few books on the topic. I could now understand why, though—the results of losing control were terrifying. Damn...I really screwed up.

“Well, it's not all bad,” she told me, flicking out some paper.

“My Soul Book?” I asked. She'd taken it without asking, but I couldn't muster up a protest.

“Here,” she replied, pointing.

Yup, no impro—what?! “Mastery level...200?!” I cried. It was only 160 the other day. How'd it shoot up so fast?!

Whoa, did this mean that there was a more efficient way to raise it?!

“You might not remember, but you just used *really* powerful magic. Oh, and don't ever use your rage in your magic again. You might screw up and catch your allies in an out-of-control spell.”

I paused for a moment, then answered in a serious voice. “I'll be sure to keep that in mind.” Imagining Sasa or Lucy getting caught up in my spell made me shudder. I'd definitely avoid using elemental magic like that.

“You're waking up,” Noah pointed out.

“I made everyone worry.”

Noah nodded, her conflicted smile still on her lips. “You might have messed up this time, but no getting down. See you.”

With a wave of her hand, she vanished. Her words were probably meant to

comfort me, so I muttered a quick thanks.



When I opened my eyes, Lucy and Sasa were right next to me, and their voices were raised.

“Makoto!”

“Takatsuki!”

Prince Leonardo was standing a little farther back. “Makoto, are you okay?” he asked, voice laced with worry. Princess Sophia was at his side, and Princess Noelle was standing apart from them.

“Gerald, wake up,” said Princess Noelle

“I’m...alive?”

The Hero of Lightning was at her side. Apparently, he’d healed up as well. Phew, what a relief.

“You’ve caused a lot of trouble. Apologize to Sir Makoto,” ordered Princess Noelle.

“Shut it.”

He seemed as full of himself as ever. I could respect that in some way, but it still made me wonder... I asked Prince Leonardo about it since he was close by.

“Prince Leonardo, why does he speak like that with Princess Noelle? Isn’t she of a higher rank?”

The prince had a sad look on his face as he answered. “Lord Gerald and Princess Noelle have known each other since childhood... In fact, until the Hero of Light arrived, they were engaged.”

“What?!”

So basically, Sakurai had taken Gerald’s childhood friend and fiancée from him? On top of that, now he had to play second fiddle as a hero. That...was kinda sad.

“Awful...”

“It is...”

Prince Leonardo and I shared a deep sigh.

“Screw this,” Gerald spat, not meeting our eyes.

“Gerald!” called out Princess Noelle, but he ignored her angry yell and left the arena. He carried none of the indomitable aura from before, only sorrow.

Chapter 2: Makoto Takatsuki Reunites with the Grandsage

“Hero Makoto, are you well?” Princess Sophia asked. She brushed a hand over my back as I stared vacantly after Gerald.

That’s right, I need to thank her.

“Princess Sophia, thank you for your healing,” I said. *Water Magic: Healwater* was a mid rank skill, and obviously not one I knew.

“That is the extent of the healing magic I can use...” she murmured. “I am glad you are safe.” She smiled, and her eyes watered slightly.

The sun priestess Princess Noelle was the next to speak. “Makoto, Hero of Roses, I offer my apologies for the behavior of our land’s hero.”

Her words came at the perfect time. “Thank you for healing him,” I said earnestly. “My lapse in control caused issues for you.”

Princess Noelle looked at me, seeming slightly surprised. “You saw?” she asked. “It appeared that you were unconscious.”

Oops... I’d only witnessed it because Noah had shown me. In reality, I *had* been passed out. Time to play it off.

“Uh, I just assumed you had...” I said, trailing off. “By the way, how come I passed out?”

Did I hurt myself with my own magic? I’d feel even stupider if so.

“Takatsuki, that was my fault,” Sakurai explained apologetically. “I didn’t fancy Gerald’s chances if we let things continue. You weren’t in control, so I had to stop you by force.”

Oh, so that’s what happened.

“Yup! Sakurai rushed over and gut-punched you!” Sasa exclaimed. Wait...he stopped me with a gut punch?

“Wow, Aya, you saw it happen?” Lucy asked.

“Incredible, I didn’t see a thing...” murmured the prince.

Lucy had good eyes, and Prince Leonardo was another hero. Despite that, Sakurai had reacted so fast that neither of them had seen his movements. That was incredible... But Sasa was even more incredible, considering she could follow everything.

“Thanks, Sakurai,” I said. Honestly, I think he’d be the only one *able* to stop me if I lost control... *That was so close. I can’t do that again, ever.*

There were, however, other things weighing on me.

“The Hero of Lightning is from the Ballantine family, right?” I asked. “They’re one of the five Sacred Nobles. Is it going to cause problems? Y’know, since I attacked him like that...” I’d promised not to stand against any of those families...and then I’d immediately broken that promise.

“It will be okay, Sir Makoto,” Princess Noelle answered with a smile. “I will speak with the family.”

I guess I can relax about it, then? “Thank you, Lady Noelle.”

She chuckled. “You are Sir Ryouzuke’s friend and a valued guest. I will deal with any repercussions.” Slyly, she added, “I am rather highly ranked myself, you know.” The princess then lifted a finger and winked. She sure was charismatic...and cute.

Just as I thought that someone else spoke up.

“Come on, Elementalist. You’re up—we need to talk. Come see me later.”

There were several gasps from the shock of it. The Grandsage had appeared out of nowhere with a teleport, said her piece, and vanished again.

Sh-She’s certainly...free. Oh, looks like Princess Noelle’s smile has stiffened as well.

“M-My apologies, Sir Makoto. The Grandsage is my magic instructor...”

Apparently, even the princess of Highland was no match for her.

“I wanted to thank her anyway,” I replied. *Even if she’s going to be angry with*

me. “Maybe we should head there now...”

“If you’re going, I’ll show you the way,” offered Sakurai.

“Thanks, that’ll help. Let’s go, Lucy.”

She looked shocked. “Wait? Me too?”

“You need to thank her for the bracelet, don’t you?”

“R-Right,” she stammered. “I do... I’m a bit scared, though.”

Me too.

“What about you, Sasa?” I asked.

“Hmm, I think I’ll stick around here for a bit longer. The training grounds seem fun.”

Gerald had accosted us as soon as we’d arrived, so we hadn’t been able to properly check them out. But, considering this was a training ground in the strongest country on the continent, it was probably well-equipped. Sasa had been learning martial arts from Nina, so she was interested in practicing.

Prince Leonardo and Sasa ended up staying behind at the training ground, while Princess Sophia and Princess Noelle went off somewhere else to deal with other business. Lucy and I were guided along by Sakurai to the Grandsage.

“We’re here, Takatsuki,” Sakurai informed us. We’d just arrived at an estate on the outskirts of the castle grounds.

“Whoa...”

“What on...”

It was like stepping into another world...one made of silver.

The mansion was a bizarre construction of gleaming ice and crystal. Lucy and I could only stare, open-mouthed. The barrier around the manor seemed quartz-like and was probably imbued with mana. Magic flames flickered around this barrier, illuminating the ice mansion. In spite of the snow on the ground, the landscape was adorned with flowers in full bloom. The season was all over the place...no, not just the season...but everything. Did she use her magic to make

this...?

It looked like a wonderland, like a bizarre garden in a strange estate.

“I’ll see you both later then,” Sakurai said before heartlessly turning to leave us.

“You’re not coming with?” I asked.

Sakurai looked apologetic. “She gets angry if uninvited people drop by.”

You live in such a unique place, I thought. *You should invite more people!* But then again, she did seem rather eccentric.

“Well, let’s go, Lucy.”

“R-Right.”

We stepped onto the grounds, walked across the unseasonal snow, and then opened the door to the ice mansion.

The interior was pitch-black, despite the amount of light outside. There were, at least, evenly spaced candles that illuminated the floor. At a glance, I would have thought this was a dungeon. Seriously, the atmosphere was so uninviting...

“Excuse me, it’s Makoto Takatsuki,” I called out.

“Urk... It’s so dark,” Lucy added in a murmur, gripping my sleeve as we walked forward.

“So you’re here.”

Lucy and I both whipped around with strangled squeaks.

“Wh-What the...?”

“Uh...?”

In front of us was...a maid doll. Scary!

“This way.” The Grandsage’s voice came from the mouth of the doll. *Did she not have actual servants?*

The doll guided us farther into the mansion, and we entered a dim room. Inside was the Grandsage, clad in white robes and reclining on a massive sofa.

This space felt similar to the tent in Labyrinth Town where we'd first met, and it was filled with expensive-looking antiques.

So, does she like gloomy rooms full of stuff?

"It's been a while, Grandsage," I said. "Thank you for dealing with the water I created earlier."

"Thank you for the bracelet," added Lucy.

The two of us offered our gratitude, but the Grandsage just glared our way with cold eyes. "So you have not rescinded your following of a wicked deity."

"W-Well..." I stammered. She'd gone right for the neck...

"No matter," the Grandsage huffed. "I hardly expected you to become Roses's hero in such a brief time. Of course, now it will be impossible to publicize your faith... Knowing that their hero worships a wicked deity would have too much of an effect on public morale," she said regretfully.

Oh! Was I getting away with it?

"And you defeated that Lightning Boy. Gerald might be somewhat pathetic, but—"

"Makoto's amazing!" Lucy interjected, full of energy. I honestly didn't even remember the fight.

"In what way?" countered the Grandsage. "Such uncontrolled magic is hardly of any use."

"Yes...you're right," I conceded. "I'll be careful." Noah had made me plenty aware of the dangers.

"See that you do." The Grandsage then turned to Lucy and changed the topic. "Incidentally, redhead, are you part of the Walker family?"

"Uh? A-Ah, yes, I'm Lucy J. Walker."

"Johnnie's great-granddaughter, then..." muttered the Grandsage. "Here, take this." She suddenly tossed a staff in our direction, and Lucy flapped her arms around, fumbling to catch it.

Once she had a good grasp on it, Lucy asked, "Wh-Why the staff?"

“It was Johnnie’s.”

“Great-grandpa’s?!” Lucy exclaimed.

Hm? The Grandsage was close with Lucy’s great-grandad?

I turned to Lucy and asked, “Wait, your ancestor knew the Grandsage?”
However, Lucy wasn’t the one who answered.

“Elementalist...” said the Grandsage, “are you unaware of Springrogue’s Hero, Johnnie Walker? He was one of Abel’s companions.”

“Oh!” That had jogged by memory.

There was Abel the Savior, Anna the Holy Mother, the White Grandsage, and finally, Johnnie the Spellbow. That was the legendary party that saved the world from the Great Demon Lord. And yet, there were only four members... It didn’t seem like enough.

Still, to think one of them was Lucy’s great-grandfather! That legendary party had existed a thousand years ago...but elves were a long-lived race, so it made sense that Johnnie was only four generations removed from Lucy.

“That’s a huge deal, Lucy!” I exclaimed. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Uh...well, you know...” she said awkwardly.

Regardless, the Grandsage was being just as generous with gifts this time—after all, she’d handed over a precious weapon.

The Grandsage smirked and then spoke in a teasing tone. “I know what you want to say.”

“Uh, what do you mean?” I asked.

“My great-grandpa...the Hero of Springrogue, Johnnie Walker, had a fondness for women that was, um, *beyond* that of most elves...” Lucy confessed.

“He had fifty wives and got far more women pregnant...” said the Grandsage. “I couldn’t even count how many women he had.”

“R-Right...” And he was one member of the legendary party?! What the hell? Maybe it was just one of those things. Heroes liked the pleasures of the flesh...?

“Yeah, so there are a lot of people on the continent who claim his

bloodline...” Lucy explained. “Some that are his real grandchildren, and some that...aren’t.”

“Some also use their relation to Johnnie Walker as part of a con,” the Grandsage added.

“I respect him, but his habits...” Lucy trailed off.

That made sense. Maybe Lucy was so serious about romantic relationships because of her grandfather’s promiscuity, and her behavior was kind of like a rebellion.

“The idiot never tried to go for Anna or me, though,” the Grandsage said, reminiscing. “Well, Abel was there.”

Oh? That was a strange way of wording it...

“The way you’re talking, it sounds like you were there,” I commented. It seemed strange—her *Inheritance* skill should have given her the memories of the previous Grandsage, but this sounded much more firsthand than that.

“Hm? Oh, I haven’t explained yet.” The Grandsage fixed her ruby-red eyes on me. “What have you heard of me?”

“That you’re the descendant of the Grandsage that was in Abel the Savior’s party,” I stated. “And that your *Inheritance* skill gives you the powers and memories of the first Grandsage...” That’s what I’d heard, but her actions were making me rethink it a bit.

“That’s a lie,” she said easily.

Lucy and I both shouted in shock.

“A lie...in what way?” I asked.

“It’s false. I don’t have an *Inheritance* skill.”

“Th-Then you don’t have her abilities at all! You’re tricking everyone!” Lucy shouted, raging. She’d once told me that the Grandsage was the pinnacle of mages, so maybe now she felt betrayed.

“I mean, she’s still pretty impressive as a mage, so it’s fine, isn’t it?” From my perspective, she was someone (albeit a scary someone) that I owed, someone

who had taught me all kinds of things.

“No!” snapped Lucy. “She has to have the *power* of the Grandsage that fought alongside Abel the Savior! That’s why the Hero of Light skill is such a big thing, and why everyone respects Princess Noelle and her Priestess of Light skill... It’s the same one that the Holy Mother had. The Hero of Lightning skill is...I suppose more or less the same.”

Poor Gerald...more or less the same indeed... It made sense, though. The tale of Abel the Savior and his heroic party was known by all. And, in the present day, their skills were almost deified by the people living in this world.

“I apologize for getting you worked up,” the Grandsage interjected, “but I *do* have that power.”

Both Lucy and I let out confused noises. What did she mean...? Hadn’t she said that she didn’t have the *Inheritance* skill?

“How...can that be?”

“I’m the same Grandsage,” answered the silver-haired, red-eyed woman in a dispassionate voice.

“U-Uh...that’s not possible. Not even elves can live that long,” Lucy argued, apparently thinking it was a joke. After all, the Grandsage looked younger than me. Though, the way she spoke...was more grown-up.

“I’m undead.”

“What?!” Lucy and I shouted in unison.

The air seemed to freeze. *That’s absurd...*

“Very few people are aware. As for you...well, you are a hero, so there should be no issue.”

“U-Uh...I see?” That was all I could really manage.

“Abel saved me back then. Ever since, I have been on mankind’s side.”

Lucy was frozen. I suppose this revelation would be more of a shock to natives—the descendant of a legendary hero was not actually reincarnated, but undead...therefore, Lucy was speaking with the *actual* hero from a thousand

years ago.

Well, that did answer one thing. “So that’s why you didn’t really mind that Lucy was half-demon or Sasa was a monster.” It’d seemed weird that she hadn’t made a fuss about that last time.

“That’s right. Incidentally, I am a vampire, though I was originally human.” The Grandsage grinned, showing off pointed fangs. The first time I’d seen her, she’d seemed almost doll-like, but now...she was a little scary.

She was also slowly coming my way.

“A vampire...? You can go out in the sunlight?” I asked. I’d lost control of my magic outdoors and during the daytime, but the Grandsage had been there to solve it. Weren’t vampires usually weak to sunlight?

“I can, but it feels awful...just the worst.”

It just feels bad?! The Grandsage was still slowly drawing closer.

“I can withstand it for a while,” she explained. “Though, I do take a little damage.”

“I-I see. I apologize for the bother, then...” She was a little less than a meter away now. If I stretched an arm out, I could touch her. She was short, so when she finally came to a stop, I was looking down at her. *Maybe I should kneel?*

“I am somewhat anemic right now,” she commented, reaching up to touch my cheek. Her skin was cold to the touch. I remembered her cold fingers from last time when she’d used her magic to examine my skills.

“This is the price, Elementalist. Hand over your blood.” As the Grandsage spoke, she let her fangs show.

Uh...

What was that just now?

“Wait a minute!” Lucy shouted, getting between us. “What do you mean, hand over his blood?!”

“I just explained, did I not? I am a vampire, so of course I drink blood.”

“But then Makoto will turn into a vampire!”

Oh, so it worked like that? Vampires turned people by sucking blood... I suppose that fact was true across worlds.

“Don’t worry,” the Grandsage said. “I wouldn’t turn another country’s hero into a vampire. I’ll hold back.”

Suddenly, she grabbed hold of my collar and tugged me down.

Whoa! She’s strong.

Her pale skin and big red eyes loomed right in front of me.



“Now then, my thanks for the meal.”

“Try not to make it hurt...?” I pleaded.

The only answer she gave was a smirk before she opened her mouth wide. I heard the soft sound of her lips sealing on my neck, followed by a sharp, painful sensation.

“Kuh...” I grunted. It hurt...less than I’d expected...maybe?

“M-Makoto...are you okay?” Lucy asked, flitting about and watching. I smiled to keep her from worrying.

The soft gulping sounds made their way to my ears. Wow...she was actually sipping my blood.

“U-Um... Are you nearly done?” Lucy interjected. “Or...would you swap with me?!” I guess she’d started to worry and had offered to take my place.

“It’s fine, Lucy,” I said after a moment. I could hardly ask a girl to swap out with me.

After a while, the Grandsage released me with a sigh and I heard the sound of *High Heal* being cast.

Oh, the pain’s gone. I felt that there wasn’t a mark on my neck either, so she must have healed me.

“That was delicious,” said the Grandsage, licking her lips in satisfaction. She seemed to have more traces of color on her cheeks. Her small tongue lapped out and caught the slight droplets that had dripped from her mouth. That...was kinda hot.

“So...it was to your liking?” I inquired.

“Unsullied blood is definitely the best. And otherworlders eat better, so it’s even higher quality.”

“Do we?”

All I ever ate back then was junk food like burgers and fries. I’d lived a fairly unhealthy lifestyle, but apparently, my blood was enjoyable.

“Unsullied blood,” Lucy repeated, her expression darkening.

“What’s up?” I asked her.

“I wouldn’t have been able to stand in, then...”

What? Was calling my blood “unsullied” bothering her?

“Hey, redheaded mage—you’ve got it wrong,” the Grandsage said, seeming to know something.

“Isn’t my blood sullied because of the demon blood?”

“No. There are a lot of people that call mixed-bloods and demons ‘sullied,’ but I don’t mean it in that way. Besides, I’d fall under that category as well.”

Oh, that was why. So cambions were those with “sullied blood.” *I guess it’s some kind of slur...*

“Then what is unsullied blood?” Lucy wondered.

The Grandsage looked away. For how upfront her behavior usually was, this seemed unusual.

“Grandsage?” I pressed.

“Please, tell us.”

She hummed, then began to speak. “Well... Unsullied blood is what you’d think. Blood from people that haven’t had sexual experience.”

“Uh?”

“What?”

“Elementalist, you’re a virgin, right?” asked the Grandsage.

What?!

“I-I-I-I’m not!” I protested reflexively.

“What? You’re not?!” Lucy asked.

Come on, quit it, Lucy, it’s a lie! I am...

“Hmm, and yet my ultra rank *Appraisal* skill says ‘Status: Virgin.’”

“*Appraisal* tells you that?!”

Where was the privacy?!

"A-Appraisal reveals that as well?" Lucy asked, wrapping her arms around her body and stepping back.

"King rank also tells you the number of partners. Though I don't think you'd want to know."

Lucy and I both yelped in fear.

Damn...that was a harsh skill. Fujiyan had ultra rank *Appraisal*, right? He wouldn't have it grow to king rank, right?

Well, Fujiyan already knows I'm a virgin, so it's not like it matters!

"Uh, so Makoto's blood is tasty because he's a virgin?"

Lucy! You don't need to make sure!

"Indeed. Mortal, virgin blood is certainly the best!" The Grandsage smiled widely, and Lucy's shoulders shook.

Hey...don't laugh at me...

"Now we're even," declared the Grandsage. "I cleaned up after you, and you fed me." Then, she giggled. "If you offer me some more, I'll help you out whenever."

"Uh, that's kinda..." Not something I wanted to consider.

"What do you normally do for food?" Lucy asked. I was wondering as well. She didn't feed on other people, did she?

"As I said, my status is a state secret, so I have medical blood for my meals. It lacks flavor though... Fresh is best, as they say." She said the last sentence while looking at me and licking her lips.

"Couldn't you drink from someone else?" I asked.

"Hmph! They're all past their best. The Hero of Light's blood was the worst... There are few men of your age that are still virgins. I would never drink from a child either."

"I see..." So virginity was rare. That wasn't the least bit comforting!

"Cheer up, Makoto," Lucy consoled. "You'll be fine."

Hey, I can see the smile in your eyes there...

“That’s a fine thing coming from you, virgin mage.”

“Wha?!”

Looks like you’ve been found out, Lucy.

“I’m just going to go,” I said eventually. It was best to get out before anything else was revealed.

“Very well. Visit me if you have need,” said the Grandsage. She seemed rather cheery right now.

Oh, wait... I needed to ask her about something.

“I beat a hero of the Ballantine family, so I was wondering if there’d be issues.”

“Oh, that?” scoffed the Grandsage. “Who do you think I am? I have been the Grandsage since this country’s founding. They’ll regret it if they start anything.”

Well, that made me feel better. If I had both Princess Noelle and the Grandsage on my side, I’d be fine.

“But...” she continued, “you know what I’ll ask for in return...right?” She smirked at me. I guess I’d be paying with my body. Or my blood, at least. I should just think of it as a blood donation.

“Also, try and keep your blood unsullied! Stay the virgin you are.”

“Don’t ask for the impossible.” I couldn’t follow that order, even if it *did* come from her!

“Oh, you plan to discard it? What a shame...your blood will not taste as good.”

“What?!” Lucy exclaimed. “Makoto, who with?! Aya? Princess Sophia?”

Seriously, was she an idiot? “I haven’t got any plans like that,” I replied. Also, I’d prefer if she didn’t bring up the names of girls so close to us.

“Th-Then...you might consider throwing it away with me?” Lucy offered, before quickly backtracking. “Uh...kidding.”

“L-Lucy?!”

That was something really big she’d just come out with.

But then, the Grandsage broke the tension by scolding us. “Get a room, you two. I’ll throw you out.” She wasn’t so happy anymore, it seemed. I thought we should leave quickly.

“Thank you for everything, then,” I said.

But before we could go, Lucy spoke up. “U-Um! Grandsage, I’d like to ask about my great-grandpa... Would you be willing to tell me?”

“Hm, I suppose I do not mind.”

Guess Lucy was staying, then. “You’ll get your blood sucked,” I warned her.

“Fool,” chided the Grandsage. “Not just anyone will do. As a former human, elf and demon blood does not match my body.”

“So that’s how it works?”

Vampires had their own struggles then, I thought before leaving the mansion.

The blood loss had worn me out, so I went back to the inn and took a nap in my room. Around dinner time, I wandered down to the canteen. Fujiyan was there, and the second he spotted me, he leaped up in my direction.

“My esteemed Tackie! I have heard of your exploits! And your victory over the Hero of Lightning, Sir Gerald!”

“I’m not sure victory’s the word...” said Lucy.

Sasa murmured, “More like murder...”

Guess they’d gotten back to the inn as well. They must have told Fujiyan about Gerald.

“S-Sir Makoto defeated the third-ranked Hero of Lightning...” Chris said in a shaking voice.

“I knew it! There’s more to him than meets the eye’h!” Nina cheered. She always hyped me up.

“Chris, what do you mean by ‘ranked’?” Sasa asked. I hadn’t heard about it before either.

“Every year, each of the six nations gathers for a summit with their royalty and representatives. One of the events is a series of mock battles between each country’s strongest warriors,” she answered.

“And where they place is what they’re ranked’h!” Nina added.

“I see. Who’s first, by the way?” I asked, though I already had a decent idea.

“That would be our Hero of Light right here’h!” Nina said, directing her smile toward Sakurai. Oh, that made me realize he was here...for some reason.

“Fujiwara invited me,” he explained with a dazzling smile, “and I wanted to take some time to speak with you all a bit more peacefully.”

The ever-beautiful Yokoyama was behind him. When our eyes met, she gave me a smile. Back in class, she would’ve never looked my way, but she seemed pretty approachable now. I must have changed her opinion back in Labyrinthos. *It seems like there are a lot of our classmates here...*

“Let us eat, then!” Fujiyan directed us over to a table laden with a lavish feast. “The preparations have already been made.”

There were expensive-looking cheeses and hors d’oeuvre lined up, along with salads and terrines using seasonal vegetables. There was a soup that smelled of tasty mushrooms, and a shellfish gratin that contained something similar to lobster. There were also juicy steaks alongside vividly colored sauces, and the feast was topped off with a mound of fruit and desserts.

“It looks like French cuisine,” Sasa commented.

“This stuff has a lot of calories though, so you need to be careful,” Yokoyama added.

“That’s awful.”

“I know, right?”

It was just like Sasa and Yokoyama were back at school...

“What did you get up to today?” I asked Fujiyan.

“I visited my business partners. Tomorrow, I am planning to tour the town. Would you care to join me?”

“Sure, I’ll tag along.” Exploring the capital! This was the biggest city on the continent, so I couldn’t wait.

“Still, my friend, I see you have let your recklessness show again,” Fujiyan chastised.

“Indeed. Fighting a man like him is ridiculous.”

Fujiyan and Chris were both gazing at me, looking disappointed.

“He didn’t exactly give me much choice.”

I hadn’t been in the wrong...probably.

“It’s a good thing Sakurai was there,” said Sasa.

“It really is,” Lucy agreed. “For a minute there, I didn’t know *what* was about to happen.”

Sasa must’ve seen what my spell did to Gerald, while Lucy must have felt the mana breaking out of my control. Neither of them had been able to stop me, but thankfully, our dashing Sakurai had pulled through.

“Serious thanks, Sakurai,” I said.

“I mean, I wouldn’t do anything else, would I?”

That’s the Hero of Light for you. Handsome inside and out.

“You’re really close with him, actually,” Yokoyama said in apparent realization. I didn’t exactly think we were *close*, but we now had more chances to talk like we used to.

“He’s my friend from junior high,” Sakurai explained easily.

Hmm? We were friends back then? We’d barely spoken at school...junior or high.

Sasa squealed, and her shock was followed by similarly surprised exclamations from Fujiyan and Yokoyama.

“My esteemed Tackie! I have yet to hear of this!”

“But I never saw you talking in junior high...?” Sasa pointed out.

“Does it matter?” I asked. It’s not like everyone who went to the same elementary school stays friends. When Sakurai and I got into the upper years of junior high, the vast gulf of high and low castes grew between us. Sakurai was right in the middle of the class while I was on the outskirts, playing games or reading manga.

“Takatsuki lived next door, so we spent a lot of time together as kids,” Sakurai explained.

“We weren’t neighbors,” I countered. “Your tower block was just next to our crappy one.”

“We walked to school together back in elementary though, didn’t we?”

I mean, we did, but I was surprised he remembered.

“Hey, what was he like back then?” Sasa demanded

My past...wasn’t anything special.

“Oh!” Sakurai exclaimed with a smile. “I’ll tell you about when Takatsuki saved us.”

Uh? What?

◇ Ryousuke Sakurai’s Perspective ◇

I thought back to our third year of elementary school.

Once class was finished, all of us would often meet up. There were three guys and two girls in our group. Takatsuki and I were two of the guys, and we were always the first to arrive since we lived close to each other.

“No,” Takatsuki interjected, interrupting my story. “You just always kept knocking for me. I wanted to stay home.”

“Really?” I guess it had been so long that I didn’t quite remember.

“Besides, I always said I’d come if I could. Just...sometimes I was gaming.”

“Takatsuki, you really haven’t changed much, have you,” Sasaki asked with a rueful smile. Takatsuki was wearing an unhappy look as we talked about the

past.

The two of us lived near each other, so we often played together. On clear days, we would play outside; on rainy days, we'd go over to someone's home. That's how we spent our time.

One time, there was this guy that gave us sweets. He was all smiles as he talked with us, and before we knew it, he'd started turning up at a park we often played in. He dressed normally and didn't seem dodgy at all—he was just a nice guy.

Since we were happy kids, he always had snacks and gave them to us. Our group was suspicious at first, but one time he brought his dog on a walk and told us all about it. The girls dropped their guard when they saw the cute Pomeranian. It was adorable, and the man kept coming by, always bringing the dog along to play. None of us thought too deeply about it.

"That sounds suspicious," Sasaki commented.

"Hmm, while I cannot pass judgment yet..." Fujiwara said, a pinched look on his face.

Takatsuki was frowning. H-He hadn't forgotten, had he?

For a while, we played with the cute puppy a lot more.

Then, it happened.

The man was always smiling, but then, things were different. One day, he didn't bring his puppy, but by that time, we'd let our guard down. There were tower blocks all around our little park, so we were highly visible as we played. But under the tree cover, where it was harder to be seen, the man showed his true colors.

"His true colors?"

"Uh, you cannot mean..."

Sasaki and Fujiwara both frowned.

“Yeah,” I confirmed. “He was a deviant after little girls.”

“Disgraceful...” spat Fujiyan.

The man suddenly struck us boys, trying to shut us up, and then he started trying to undress the scared girls.

“Th-That’s awful.” Chris, who was one of the nobles from Macallan, looked slightly scared. She gripped the rabbit-eared woman’s hand.

“It was the first time an adult had ever hit me,” I explained. “It hurt and I was scared, but I couldn’t just do nothing.”

“W-Wow, you’re so brave,” Sasaki replied, looking at me in shock.

“You were the Hero of Light, though, so surely that was no issue’h?” Fujiwara’s lover Nina asked, looking oddly at me.

“In our old world, I wasn’t a hero or anything. I was just a little kid. The other boy and I got beat up pretty bad.” I still regretted how stupid it had been to trust that man so easily. He’d hit my friends and made the girls cry. But I couldn’t have done anything.

“Why didn’t you scream?” Sasaki asked.

“I did—we yelled for help, and the girls were crying. The park always had kids playing though, so there was constantly a lot of noise. No one came to our aid.”

“That...was a daring crime...” Fujiwara murmured.

It really was. He’d used a puppy to lower our guards and had then tried to commit a crime in a blind spot. I didn’t know the full details, but it might’ve even been a habit of his.

“Uh? So what happened to you, then, Makoto?” asked the redheaded elf as she shook his shoulders. Takatsuki was frowning in thought.

Uh? Did he manage to forget?

“So what then?” Sasaki pressed.

I thought it was over. My body ached and I couldn't even cry out. I didn't know what was going to happen, but I was shaking in fear, and the other boy had fainted. I was desperate.

Then, I heard a loud crash, but it seemed like the man didn't register the sound. He was too focused on the scared girls. Just as he was reaching out for them, there were several more crashes, one after another.

The noise indicated that something was breaking, and at this point, the man noticed. Not even a minute later, people came out of the apartments nearby, and then the police arrived. I didn't know what was going on.

Saki, Fujiwara, and Sasaki were staring at me, looking puzzled.

"Uh, I don't get it."

Lucy, Nina, and Chris all seemed troubled. "Did you do something?" Sasaki asked Takatsuki.

He answered unhappily. "No one came to help even when I yelled, so I made sure people would come," Takatsuki stated, glossing over what he'd done.

"What do you mean?"

"While we were being targeted, he broke some windows and made a commotion," I explained.

Our other three classmates shouted in shock while Takatsuki looked chagrined.

"Breaking windows brought help?" Chris asked with an odd look.

"Shattering even a single window was a pretty big thing in our world. We lived in a peaceful town with no monsters," Takatsuki said absently.

"And it wasn't just a single window," I added. "Didn't you break all of the windows on the apartment building?"

I'd only found that detail out later, but it was impressive that Takatsuki hadn't even hesitated.

“Uh, how?” Sasaki asked. “The area around your place was pretty well-maintained, so I doubt there would’ve been stones to throw.”

She was right, and Takatsuki reluctantly explained. “I had them with me. I’d bought a load of ball bearings to break windows with.”

“What?” the other three asked flatly. I’d also been surprised to hear that the first time.

Slowly, he kept going. “Well, I was really into a western game back then. The main character would go wild in town and a load of police would appear. In the game, you’d use guns and grenades, but you can’t get those in Japan, right? So the best I could do was to break windows...that was what I thought back then, anyway. I wanted to find out how many police officers would turn up.”

“So you were walking around with something to break windows?” asked Sasaki in wonder.

“Well, I didn’t know when I’d get my chance...it was just a little prank.”

Takatsuki was sulking.

“A *little* prank...you say?” asked Fujiwara slowly.

“Games rotted your brain...”

“Leave me be! I’m not proud of it!” Takatsuki groaned. “The teachers and my parents really let me have it after that!” After his outburst, he clutched his head. Oh yeah, that was right—Takatsuki hadn’t been happy that the adults were angry with him, I suppose.

“You saved us because of that, though.”

“Right?! It was my plan, but you and the other guy were heroes the day after! I had to write a twenty-page apology essay! It’s not fair,” he pouted.

“W-Well, yeah. How many windows did you break, by the way?” Sasaki asked sympathetically.

“Windows broken: eleven, accuracy: ninety percent. Not bad, right? I included that in the essay.”

“Where’s the apology there?!” exclaimed Sasaki

“They got even angrier for some reason.”

“Are you an idiot?!”

I watched those two act out their skit, thinking that it had been too long since I’d chatted with Takatsuki like this. It was fun. He hadn’t changed a bit, and it brought back other memories.

“That was in our third year. The next one was in our fifth—”

“Sakurai! Enough of the past!” he yelled in a fluster, filling my glass with booze. I didn’t really drink, but I couldn’t turn it down after he’d poured for me.

“Come on, drink up,” he encouraged. It’d been too long since we’d had a decent conversation.

I picked up the glass and downed the contents.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

Sakurai was snoring softly, out like a light from drinking a single glass.

Uh, what? Was he a lightweight? But what about the protection from his *Hero of Light* skill?

“Ryousuke doesn’t drink,” Yokoyama explained. “Plus, the blessing from the sun goddess is weaker at night, so he gets drunk easily.”

“Oh, I see. I never expected that,” Sasa said, prodding him on the cheek. He sure didn’t look like he’d wake up any time soon.

“I think he forced himself since you suggested it.”

“What?” *For real? Maybe I shouldn’t have done that... It probably counts as peer pressure.* Still, if I’d let him be, he was going to spill everything about my embarrassing past...

“Even so, Sir Sakurai seems to be exhausted,” Fujiyan observed. “Even more so than at our prior meetings.”

“He does, husband?” Chris asked.

“Indeed. Almost done in, I would say.”

Seriously? I hadn’t noticed at all.

Yokoyama's expression also seemed fatigued as she answered. "Ryousuke's the Hero of Light, right? Everyone sees him as a reincarnation of the savior. Highland's first princess Lady Noelle became his fiancée. The first and second princes poisoned his food and cursed him, and assassins have even been sent after him."

Wait, really? Damn...I didn't know Sakurai had gone through so mu—

"But," Yokoyama broke my train of thought with a chagrined look, "the sun goddess's favor rendered the poisons and curses useless. He beat back two assassins unarmed and didn't even get a scratch. Plus, any time he *does* get hurt, he heals right away, as long as he soaks up some sun. It's too much, isn't it?"

"O-Ohhh..." the rest of us managed in unison.

Come on, that power's way too OP! Would anyone in this world be able to win against him?

"Still, he'd be in trouble at night, so us knights take shifts to guard him."

I get it—untouchable hero by day, in danger by night.

"I almost forgot... You're his fiancée, right?" Sasa asked Yokoyama nonchalantly.

"Yeah, Eri and me both."

"O-Okay," Sasa stammered. "And you're fine with that?" She wore a slightly conflicted expression.

"Mmm, at first," Yokoyama answered. Her eyes seemed to warm with a wife's feelings as she looked at Sakurai. "He has more than twenty fiancées. We're all in order too. I'm the eighteenth and Eri's the seventeenth. It all feels kinda pointless."

"Wh-Whoa."

"Twenty..."

Lucy and Sasa were both in shock. Twenty fiancées...I couldn't even imagine.

"Ryousuke doesn't seem to enjoy it at all, though. I mean, the king gave him

an order: have as many kids as possible to leave behind a legacy. He's constantly spending nights with girls, so he doesn't have any downtime. Then during the day, he has to deal with over a thousand members of the Soleil Knights."

"That would curtail his relaxation indeed..." Fujiyan remarked sympathetically. And Fujiyan was right—I didn't feel jealous of Sakurai when I heard that.

"He says that's the reason why he can relax around old friends like Eri or me. She and I didn't use to get along when we were around him, but now we're like sisters in arms."

"I see..." Sasa mused with an inscrutable look.

Lucy was listening to Yokoyama, her face shining with admiration.

Yokoyama looked my way. "Hey, Takatsuki." In our old world, she'd been our class's beauty, and I'd never heard her say my name in that tone back then.

"What?" I asked casually.

"Ryousuke told me something once... He said that even though people rely on him for aid and ask for his help, he doesn't have anyone in his life who could return those favors..."

"That makes sense," Sasa said. "He's always been the leader."

No matter what group Sakurai was in, things always ended up centering around him. He just drew people in.

"That's why it left such a big impression when you helped him in the past," Yokoyama explained, "and also why he was so happy that you cast a king rank spell to aid with the blight dragons." She smiled ruefully. "He said you always manage to offer help in a completely unexpected way."

"O-Oh," was all I could say. Fighting the blight dragons had just been a coincidence at the time—the elementals there had been happy to help.

"I hope you'll do the same again," she continued.

After a moment, I answered. "Yeah, got it." I'd do what I could at least. After all, he was an old friend.

“Ryousuke had fun today, I think,” Yokoyama said, stroking his hair as he slept. “He really wanted you to join the Soleil Knights, Takatsuki, but then you ended up as Roses’s hero, so he couldn’t invite you. He seemed kinda bummed about it.”

“R-Right...” He was serious?! I wasn’t going to join an army, though...

“Well, he’s passed out, so we should get going.” As she spoke, Yokoyama hefted Sakurai up into a bridal carry. Seeing her slight form holding him in the air was a real “yup, this isn’t our world” moment.

“Come see him again,” were her last words before she left.

After they left, Sasa said, “Sakurai and Saki have so much on their shoulders...”

“The Hero of Light doesn’t have an easy job...” Lucy added.

The two of them looked worried as they watched the other pair leave. A solemn mood shrouded the table.

“My esteemed Tackie, perhaps you should take the initiative to visit him at some point?” Fujiyan suggested.

“Yeah, I’ll pick up a gift or something and go hang out.” It’d be nice to take things easy with him again, just like when we were kids.

Chapter 3: Makoto Takatsuki Explores the Capital

“This, my esteemed Tackie, is the seventh district. The town of the demi-humans.”

“Hmm... So this is the other side of Highland Castle.”

The day after our impromptu class reunion, Fujiyan and Nina brought me to see the seventh district. It definitely felt different than the sixth district; that one was well maintained, but this place almost felt like a hodgepodge of infrastructure. The ground wasn't paved, just dirt. There were a lot of people around that seemed to be coated in a layer of dust. The people spoke loudly and chaotically, and there were all kinds of races: humans, beastmen, elves, dwarves, lizardmen, and others. Most of the humans were merchants, and there were stalls all over the place heaped with goods.

“Mister Takatsuki, make sure you don't get separated from us'h.”

“Nina, I'm not a kid,” I protested.

“Could I request three of these?” Fujiyan asked a merchant, pointing out chicken and vegetable sandwiches. He quickly completed the purchase and handed one to Nina and me respectively.

“Here, both of you.”

“Thank you, husband'h.”

“Thanks, Fujiyan.”

The bread was hard, but it'd soaked up the meat juices. That combined with the rich sauce slathered on the sandwich made it taste great.

“Do you come out here often?” I asked Fujiyan.

“The prices are lower here than in the sixth district,” he explained. “There are things just waiting to be found as well.”

“There are also plenty of people that'll rip you off'h,” Nina added. “Not that he would need to worry about that'h.”

“We do our best business by purchasing inventory here, and then reselling it to nobles in the third district,” Fujiyan said before both he and Nina broke into laughter.

So the prices were different between the human and demi-human districts. With his ultra rank *Appraisal* skill, Fujiyan could easily find hidden gems. I took another glance around and noticed that this place almost looked like the market towns in southeast Asia.

“Incidentally,” Fujiyan said, pulling me from my thoughts. “I have heard from Princess Sophia that there will be a party in Highland Castle tonight...to commemorate the advent of a new Hero of Roses. Princess Noelle is sponsoring the event.”

“Uh...a new hero?” *Right, that’s me.* “Wait, why here? We’re in Highland.” I’d understand celebrating in Roses, but not in another nation.

“The announcement of a new hero is wonderful news that is widely spread’h,” Nina explained. “It raises the citizens’ spirits, so hosting an event like this is rather common’h.”

That made sense—they used heroes as political tools.

“Highland has a stricter sense of decorum than Roses though, so be careful’h...” she added, her voice a touch worried.

“After all, you embroiled yourself in a fight with one of the five Sacred Nobles immediately after our arrival to the capital.” Fujiyan was looking worried as well.

All right, already! I’m sorry!

“Where are we heading now?” I asked, changing the subject.

“We’re visiting someone who helped me in the past’h,” Nina answered with a giggle. “We plan to ask for some advice and give the good news about our marriage.”

The happy look on her face was a heartwarming sight.

“Let us be off, then,” Fujiyan said, leading the way toward our destination.

Makoto had hurried away with Fujiyan and Nina, shouting behind him something about how “exploring a town is the first thing you should do in a new place!”

He was full of energy again, even though he’d only fought with Gerald yesterday. Shouldn’t he be more tired?

“Aya, are you sure you don’t want to go with them?” I asked.

“Well, they said they were going to weapon and armor shops. It sounded boring. What about you?”

“I’m going to ask the Grandsage for training.”

“Oh!” Aya exclaimed. “That sounds fun. Can I come?”

“You want to meet with the Grandsage? I mean, I don’t mind.”

We’d explained to Aya about the Grandsage being a vampire *and* the legendary hero herself from a thousand years ago. We’d even told her about Makoto getting his blood sucked. Since we were party members, that sort of disclosure should be fine, but wasn’t she scared? Makoto had said he’d avoid seeing the Grandsage for a while...

“I do want to get some shopping done first, though. Wanna tag along?”

So she wanted to wander the shops. Aya had the same kind of wanderlust as Makoto.

“Yeah, sure.” We had a while before I’d arranged to meet the Grandsage anyway.

Besides, this was the first time I’d ever been in Highland’s capital. A single elf roaming the streets in the human areas would draw attention, so going with Aya might be for the best.

And so, the two of us headed out to explore the capital.

“I-It’s all...so expensive,” I commented.

“Yeah...though these clothes *are* cute.”

Aya met my gaze. The prices in Symphonia were high. Roses’s capital—Horn—

had boasted higher prices relative to Macallan, but the ones here were even worse. To blend in during our shopping trip, I was wearing a hat that covered my ears. Elves, at least, could pass for humans if we covered them.

“Shall we get something to eat?” I was a bit hungry.

“Don’t you need to go see the Grandsage?”

“It’s still only noon. She sleeps during the day, so she said I was better off coming later in the day.”

“Oh... But didn’t Fujiwara mention a party in the castle tonight?”

“The party...”

It was a banquet to celebrate a Roses’s new hero...aka, Makoto. It would be a grand social event in Highland, where there was a strong tendency toward human supremacy. I doubted the function would be pleasant for an elf like me.

“I think I’ll pass...maybe,” I said.

“What?! Nina said she wouldn’t be there either! I don’t want to go on my own,” she protested, tugging at my sleeve.

“Princess Sophia will be there, won’t she?”

“We’re not that close yet... Plus, she’s a big shot...”

I could understand Aya’s nerves at least... We exchanged looks again.

Suddenly, a voice spoke up from out of nowhere. “You two... Both of you have a strange fate awaiting you.” When we looked around, we saw that the person speaking was wearing a hooded purple robe. I couldn’t see what they looked like, but I could tell that the voice was female. On the table in front of her sat a large crystal ball.

A fortune-teller, perhaps. There was a suspicious air about her though, it might be better to ignore her.

“Fate?” asked Aya.

Damn, she responded.

“Come on, Aya, you can’t.”

Fortune-telling was popular among a certain number of human women. Many were frauds though—they were quick talkers that demanded huge sums for their readings. There were very few practitioners of fate magic that could actually predict the future.

Meeting a mage on the side of the road like this...she was probably a fake, or else exceedingly weak.

“So this world has fortune-tellers,” Aya mused, looking at the woman with interest.

“Ah, so you have come from the otherworld. What curious providence you possess.”

“You can tell?” Aya took a few bobbing steps forward.

Argh, she was getting taken in, so I had to follow her toward the fortune-teller as well.

“What do you wish to know?” the woman inquired with a slight smile. Her robe hid most of her face, but she seemed to be quite the beauty.

“Hmm, but how do we know you’re a real fortune-teller?” Aya wondered with a smirk.

“Oh how that pains me. Despite my looks, I *am* the foremost reader of fate within the capital.” The fortune-teller’s answer was accompanied by a chuckle and a confident grin.

“Then tell me something about us. Maybe I’ll consider it then.”

Not bad, Aya. If she gets it wrong, then we don’t lose out.

It was a common thing for frauds with *Appraisal* to act like they understood you. The skill would only tell you a name, job, and current information. But telling the future, and the inner workings of the mind, in general, were beyond the scope of *Appraisal* entirely. That was the domain of fate magic and the legendary mind reading skills.

She chuckled daintily and spoke. “I shall take a look...” Then, she peered into her crystal ball.

“Hey, Lu,” Aya whispered, “does fortune-telling magic exist?”

“Yeah,” I murmured. “It’s metal magic, but I’ve never met someone who could use it.”

So, is this woman the real deal?

“Oh my, what an interesting result,” the fortune-teller said as she lifted her head. When I caught sight of her eyes, my heart skipped a beat.

“You have worries...of the heart,” she told Aya.

“Well...I guess so,” Aya answered.

Most people our age did. Aya looked disappointed.

But the fortune-teller wasn’t finished. “Those worries stem...” she chuckled, pausing, “from the fact you have feelings for the same person as your friend. Am I correct?”

“M-Maybe,” stammered Aya. The conversation had suddenly gotten much more specific...

“Would that friend,” the fortune-teller continued with a teasing twist to her lips, “happen to be the elf next to you?”

We both gasped.

Wow, that’s completely right. Maybe she is the real deal.

“Now, let us view who your beloved will be with...” muttered the fortune-teller. “Excuse me?”

“What’s wrong, miss?”

“W-Wait a moment. Three of you?! Does that even happen?!” The fortune-teller’s earlier composure was gone, along with her unflushed complexion.

“What did you see?” I asked.

“Y-You two are rivals...that have feelings for the same person, no?”

“Yeah?”

“What’s wrong?” Aya and I asked in turn.

“Romance these days is complicated,” she said after a pause, looking almost fearfully at us. Either way, it seemed like she really had the magic. Aya’s eyes

sharpened.

“How much do you charge?”

“Five thousand,” came the answer. “Up front.”

“That’s a lot,” I interjected.

“She seems accurate, though,” Aya argued. She took the money out of her purse and handed it over.

What was she going to ask?

After a short moment, Aya spoke. “Tell me—where is the sister that betrayed our family?”

Right. Aya had lost her family in Labyrinthos. We’d exacted vengeance on the harpy queen, but the other foe—Aya’s sister—had vanished.

“Sounds like a story. I will look.” The fortune-teller looked into her crystal ball again, and it started to glow vaguely in several colors.

“Okay. Your sister is on the northern continent...though I don’t know *why* she’s in a place like that.”

“Right... So she’s still alive.” Aya grimaced, clenching her first.

“Since she’s on a separate continent, any more detail is difficult,” the fortune-teller added apologetically.

“That’s fine. Knowing she’s still alive is enough...”

“Your mana feels hateful... Vengeance is a curse, you know? There’s no end to it,” offered the diviner, poking Aya on the cheek.

“You’re telling me to give up on it?”

Aya’s tone was harsh. Her sister was the reason she’d lost her family, so I doubted she’d let it go.

“Just keep it in moderation. I’d recommend getting along with your boyfriend more.”

“Right...”

Aya had a conflicted look on her face. I sympathized—we’d defeated the

harpy queen, and it seemed out of character for Aya to put all her effort into revenge. Of course, if she wanted to, Makoto and I would help her. As I thought that, the woman glanced toward me.

“What about you, redheaded elf?”

“I-I’ll pass!” I *was* super curious about any future with Makoto, though!

Just then, voices shouted from behind us. “Fortune-teller! Do you have a license to trade there?”

A knight wearing white armor had arrived. The crest engraved on it depicted Anna the Holy Mother praying. So he was a Temple Knight... They were the soldiers in charge of public order within the city.

“What a shame. It seems I’m closed for the day,” she said in lieu of a proper response, then she put her crystal ball away.

“No, you don’t! Come with me,” the knight demanded, striding toward her.

The woman didn’t panic. “It is quite all right, Sir Temple Knight. After all, I just gained permission.”

As she spoke, she touched his armor, and he began to shake.

“I-Indeed,” said the knight. “There is no problem at all.” His tone had softened, and he looked dazed as he staggered off.

“What was—” I began before Aya cut me off.

“Lu, she’s gone!”

I turned around and saw that she had indeed vanished.

“What a strange person,” murmured Aya.

She was right—what in the world had happened?

Eventually, I said, “Let’s head to the Grandsage’s place.”

“Sure.”

The two of us arrived at the Grandsage’s mansion, only to be greeted with anger as soon as we arrived.

“Why didn’t you bring the elementalist?!” griped the Grandsage.

Wait, *that* was her problem?! Surely she didn’t have feelings for Makoto? She just wanted his blood...right?

I was kinda worried.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

Fujiyan had led us to a weapon shop with a huge sign. You could practically feel the aura of experience in the place.

“Hi there, pops, it’s been a while’h!” Nina exclaimed, high-fiving the owner, who was a fierce-looking tiger man.

“You seem well, Nina. Fujiwara, it’s been too long.”

“Indeed it has, sir. Do you have any good wares today?”

“I’ve got plenty in stock. There’s no fooling you, so I’ll lose all my bargains,” he cackled.

I guess that’s how merchants greeted each other.

Once he’d finished laughing, the shopkeeper gestured to me and asked, “Who’s he?”

“This is the Hero of Roses, Mister Takatsuki’h!”

“Oh!” the man exclaimed. “So you’re the newly minted State-Authorized Hero that I’ve heard rumors about. I’m Theogore, and I run this shop. I used to be an adventurer and in the past, I helped out Nina.”

“My name’s Makoto Takatsuki. Nina has been a ton of help on our adventures.”

“What! My little Nina’s part of a hero’s party?! She’s moving up in the world!” he marveled.

“No, pops’h! I’m going to become Mister Fujiwara’s wife’h!” Nina hurriedly corrected. “We came here today to tell you.”

“What?” he asked, his expression changing instantly. “Fujiwara...I heard you had entered into an engagement with a noble from Macallan. That would make Nina a mistress. I cannot honestly celebrate such news—”

“Slow down there’h! I’ll be the second wife, treated just the same as Christina, the second daughter of Macallan’s lord.”

“What?” Theogore asked. “That’s impossible.” He seemed unable to believe it. Equal treatment between beastmen and nobility was a social taboo in Highland, and mostly impossible.

Fujiyan and Nina proceeded to explain the circumstances.

“Astounding... This Lady Christina sounds like a rather strange noble,” he said when they’d finished.

“We’re good friends now’h.”

“I see... I am glad to hear it.” Theogore answered her smile with a slightly conflicted one. He was probably concerned about her becoming a noble.

“Incidentally, how long will you be in the city?”

“Until the inauguration of the Soleil Knights’ commander in five days. My esteemed Tackie here will also be acknowledged for his contribution to slaying the blight dragons.”

“Five days...”

Theogore seemed like he was about to say something, but then he swallowed his words. What was it?

The three chatted for a while longer and I looked around the store. Fujiyan was a regular here, so I wasn’t surprised at the wide lineup. There were lots of things I’d never seen before. Suddenly, I caught a whiff of something and saw smoking leaves in a corner on the counter.

They were...

Afterward, we left the store with a promise from Nina to come again. As soon as we did, Fujiyan suggested we leave the district.

“Were we not going to the magic tool market’h?” Nina asked.

“If it’s something urgent, I don’t mind leaving,” I offered.

“No, there is something important I need to tell the two of you. However, I cannot do so in this district.”

Upon seeing Fujiyan's serious expression, Nina and I exchanged looks. We walked back to the sixth district and then booked a private room at a nearby restaurant. As he spoke, Fujiyan kept his voice low and an eye on our surroundings.

"My friends, please remain calm and listen. It seems there are plans to lead a large-scale revolt. The uprising will be centered on the beastmen in the seventh and eighth districts."

Nina and I both blurted out shocked noises in unison.

"R-Revolt?" I asked.

"What do you mean'h?!"

"Quiet, I will explain."

And he did. He'd read Theogore's mind and had found out about a plan to lead a revolt against the nobility in Symphonia. The main cause of the rebellion was dissatisfaction with Highland's rigid caste system, which demi-humans had been enduring for some time.

"But that system is relaxing'h!" Nina exclaimed. "And the heir to the throne is particularly critical of it'h. Why would they do this now?!"

"I am quite aware," Fujiyan replied. "Frankly, it feels rather too late..."

They were both shaken. Of course, so was I.

"Fujiyan," I said, "why's the class system in this country so harsh?"

"It has its origins long ago...in the dark ages over a millennium back..."

Fujiyan continued, describing some bits of history that they hadn't taught us in the Water Temple. During the Great Demon Lord's reign, humanity had suffered the harshest treatment from the demons. Humans were weak. They were the most prosperous race *now* thanks to the Sacred Deities' protection, but beastmen, elves, dwarves, and other demi-humans were strong without divine influence, so many had managed to escape the demons. Therefore, humans had endured the worst treatment during this time; they'd been treated as slaves, which had subsequently created many of the warped cambions.

It was then that Abel the Savior had appeared.

The humans of the continent had been saved by a human hero, and the country he founded had become the strongest on the continent. The humans within that country had enacted their own reign over other races.

In other words...the situation was like a bullied kid getting power and then revenge. History repeated itself. And now, the persecuted demi-humans were trying to fight back. It was like a war... This was the biggest city on the continent, and I couldn't even imagine how many victims this strife produced.

"So...you told Nina about your mind reading skill."

"I did. I have no wish to hide things from my wives, so I explained it to both Lady Nina and Lady Chris."

That made sense. I glanced over to see Nina's long ears bouncing.

"I thought my heart would stop when he told me about it'h!"

"Was it truly such a revelation?"

"It's a legendary skill... The first president of the Franz Trading Company had it'h!"

Nina was smiling, phew. His two wives must have accepted the skill. Though the atmosphere relaxed a little, Fujiyan's expression soon grew serious again.

"Back to the point at hand. Theogore is an earnest person. If he has resigned himself to this rebellion, we can presume it is not a situation for optimism. There must be some reason."

"Shouldn't we tell Sakurai and Princess Noelle?" I asked. Honestly, this felt like too much for us to deal with.

"Indeed. However, we cannot simply tell them. First, we must consult Princess Sophia via Lady Chris, and also gather reports from other merchants within the city."

"Husband, a wide-scale revolt will require weapons'h. We should question weapon merchants."

"Hmm, let us hurry."

Quickly, our choices were made.

I would have loved to help, but I'd probably just get in the way, so I decided to leave it to the pros.

"I do apologize, but it seems that this is where we part," said Fujiyan. "Please, my esteemed Tackie, attend the party this evening."

"Sure. Make sure you let me know if I can help."

"But of course!" he replied.

The pair of them rushed away, and I slowly made my way back to the inn.

The beastmen are revolting because they're dissatisfied with racial inequality...

Even when I put it into words, the situation didn't feel real.

I glanced around at the people in the street. There was a hectic peace in the area. A few days from now...this would be a battlefield...? I just couldn't picture it. My mind wouldn't piece my churning thoughts together, and before I knew it, I was back at the inn. Lucy and Sasa hadn't returned.

With nothing else to do, I offered my prayers to Noah and killed some time practicing water magic.

Evening had fallen and Fujiyan wasn't back yet. They were probably still gathering info on the rebellion, but I had a big event of my own to attend.

"Come on, Lucy, let's go."

She grumbled slightly in response. "Do I have to?"

"It'll be okay," Sasa interjected. "I'll be with you!"

Lucy made some noises of protest, wanting to stay, but Sasa dragged her along.

The three of us headed for Highland Castle.

My first impression was awe.

"It's huge..."

"So fancy!" Sasa added.

“And look at all the people!” Lucy finished up.

The three of us were overwhelmed at the sight of the huge banquet hall. It was far more grand than the modest yet refined halls of Roses Castle. This room was filled with finery and decorations, and there was more palatial cuisine than we’d ever be able to eat.

The people in attendance matched the status of the room as well—they were all clothed in fine garments and wore elegant smiles as they spoke. As I witnessed this display of extravagance, the looming rebellion that Fujiyan had told me about felt utterly nonexistent. The gathering was a scene of luxury, the likes of which you’d see in a painting.

There was a greeter who escorted us into the banquet. “Hero Makoto of Roses and your retinue, correct?” he asked. “We have been expecting you.”

Soon after walking in, Princess Sophia caught our attention. “So you have arrived. Leo, explain the rules of parties in this country.”

“Right away,” the prince replied. He was wearing formal apparel, and he quickly turned to me. “Can you see the slight differences in height on the floor?”

“I can,” I answered after a pause. “Does it mean something?”

The further into the banquet hall my eyes wandered, the higher the floor seemed to rise. There seemed to be a few layers of floor, like terraces, and they formed a set of ascending steps.

“We are standing on the level permitted to commoners,” Prince Leonardo explained. “The next step up is for nobility, and the one after that is for religious figures. The highest level is reserved for royalty.”

I let out a noise of curiosity. They segregated the classes to *this* extent? It felt like...more trouble than it was worth.

“As a hero, you are on par with nobility, so you can go as far as the third step.”

“Got it,” I replied. “What about Lucy and Sasa?”

“They are seen as your attendants, so they must remain at the fourth level,

which is where we currently are.”

“Well, there you go,” I said to the two of them.

“Got it.” Lucy bobbed her head in assent.

“I’ll be careful.” Sasa said with a nod of her own.

Since they didn’t know anyone else here, I’d figured that they’d be sticking with me... I hadn’t anticipated that we’d be separated.

“It’s you!” someone exclaimed, staring at Sasa. “You’re the girl who took down ten Soleil Knights on the training grounds yesterday!”

“Oh! But she’s so small... That’s impressive.”

“It seems that there is some truth to the rumors of Macallan’s strength.”

“N-No, it’s just a coincidence,” Sasa stammered to the sudden barrage of high-ranking knights that’d surrounded her.

I guess she’d pulled a repeat of her exploits in Roses. After all, she *did* have the strength of a hero.

“Well now, your hair is red like a rose,” another person said to Lucy. “It’s wonderful.”

“What is your name?” asked another. “Would you talk with us for a while?”

“Oh? So you’re part of the Walker family? Then...do you perhaps know the Crimson Witch?”

Lucy was also surrounded, but not by knights—a group of young noblewomen was fawning over her. Lucy’s flashy dress and appearance must have drawn their attention.

And then...there was no one left around me. I was getting confused at the sudden absence of *anyone*, but then, my *Listen* skill picked up some conversation that explained things.

“So that’s Roses’s hero... The one who almost killed Lord Gerald.”

“Unbelievable. He took down the eldest son of the Ballantines?!”

“What a fiendish excuse for a hero...”

“He must be wrong in the head.”

“I *am* a little curious. Maybe I should talk to him.”

“Don’t you dare! Nothing good will come of it.”

Yeah...I really screwed up by fighting the Hero of Lightning, didn’t I? I was being treated like a leper here.

Oh, wasn’t this banquet supposed to be held in your honor? Noah asked in my mind.

“That’s what they told me at least...” I muttered. No one was talking to me. Was I like some wild animal to them? What should I do in this kind of situation, Noah?

A mental trill of “*Good luuuck*” was her only response.

She wasn’t helping me! Damn it... Do I know anyone else here?

Princess Sophia was speaking with other royals, and Prince Leonardo was doing the same. Sakurai was technically a hero, but he was standing in the royal area. Probably because he was Princess Noelle’s fiancé...? The Grandsage...wasn’t in attendance. Naturally, Fujiyan, Nina, and Chris were also absent.

I heaved a mental sigh. *On my own, then?* I snagged a bottle of wine along with a glass and took them out to a balcony. I figured that I could at least enjoy the night sky while sipping at my drink. The wine was good too. It reminded me of the stuff I’d shared with Fujiyan back on his airship.

Shows just how rich the country is—there’s all-you-can-drink luxury wine.

The castle was built on high ground within the city, so I could look out over everything from the balcony. The lights below were still shining, even at night, and the sheer number of them were signs of the activity level; since the party in the castle was lavish, people across the town were celebrating as well.

Will there really be a rebellion? I wondered.

As the thought passed through my mind, someone called out to me.

“Oh, and what is the star of the show doing out here?” someone asked in a

teasing yet amused voice. I wasn't even irritated by the question because her tone showed off her personality.

"Princess Noelle," I replied, "thank you for your invitation tonight."

The person who'd addressed me was none other than the party's host.

"I cannot believe everyone was unwilling to speak to you...especially when you are the reason for the party itself."

"Well, it seems that yesterday was a screwup," I said with a shrug.

She sighed slightly. "Gerald is currently under house arrest. There should be droves of people wanting to speak to the man who defeated *the* Hero of Lightning, but I presume they are hesitant of attracting the ire of the current head of the Ballantine family."

I glanced toward the noble seating and saw a middle-aged man there glaring at me. Yup, I'd figured as much... Not that I'd looked his way.

"That man is Gerald's father. He understands that his son was in the wrong, but...emotions are not so easily dictated by logic," she murmured with an awkward look.

I mean, I could understand hating someone who'd nearly killed your son. Bring nobility into it, along with the problems of saving face and such... I'd just let it be.

"Oh, the dance is starting," Princess Noelle noted.

The music had shifted from a slow-paced tune to something a bit up-tempo. Noble couples were dancing in a cleared area of the room.

And among them...

"Sakurai?"

My classmate was dancing with a beautiful girl. A glance at Noelle showed me that she wasn't too bothered by it. Wasn't the princess going to dance with him?

"She's Sir Ryousuke's second fiancée, and his fourth is waiting next to them," Princess Noelle offered.

“So...” I murmured. That must be the rumored fiancée brigade, so to speak. Yokoyama was...over toward the back. Sakurai was going to dance with them all? I felt sorry for him. “Are you okay with that?”

“Everyone knows that I am his first fiancée, so making a point of that at this stage would just result in unpleasantness.” She smiled.

So that was how it worked?

“Where’s the third, then?” I asked idly.

The song had changed, and now Sakurai was dancing with his fourth (beautiful) fiancée.

“She is pregnant, so she didn’t come to the party.”

I sputtered and spun to face her.

“Oh, you weren’t aware? He currently has two children, with five more on the way. One of them is his child with the otherworlder Eri Kawamoto.”

I was dumbstruck.

For real?

I’d been completely unaware. Sakurai and Yokoyama hadn’t said anything. Though...I *had* been curious about why Kawamoto hadn’t joined us in Labyrinth Town or at the gathering yesterday...

The Hero of Light had been obligated to take twenty fiancées and have children to leave behind a legacy, right? It’d been about two years since he’d arrived, so of course he had a child or two by now... Weird. My childhood friend had children of his own. Should I just congratulate him?

“Incidentally, how is your relationship with Sophia?”

“Princess Sophia?” I asked, taken aback at the sudden topic shift.

“You swam with her on the Habhain Islands. I wish Sir Ryousuke and I could find time to go to the beach... I’m honestly jealous of Sophia.”

She had a slightly wistful smile as she spoke, but something else was on my mind.

“Who did you hear that from?”

“Oh, Sophia was very happy to bring it up,” the princess answered before giggling. “Oh, to be in love.”

“D-Did she?”

I couldn't quite picture Princess Sophia gushing over something. Whenever we'd been together, she'd worn her usual aloof impression.

“You have other cute lovers though—that means she can't quite relax.”

“What? That's n—” I was about to deny it when I suddenly realized: Lucy and Sasa had kissed me before, and I couldn't abandon my responsibility for that.

Huh? I have a harem?

You hadn't realized? came Noah's aghast question.

I hadn't! I'd just been focused on becoming a fully-fledged hero.

Not gonna happen now, Harem Hero Makoto☆

What the hell?!

Hang on... Really, the important thing was what I did from now on. I could still be a fully-fledged hero.

“Oh, is something the matter?” asked Princess Noelle as she peered at my expression.

“I'm prioritizing the battle with the Great Demon Lord before love,” I replied.

See? Fully. Fledged.

She seemed surprised by my answer, though. “My, how diligent. So those relationships will only be solidified after defeating the Great Demon Lord?”

“After the Great Demon Lord...”

Hmm, the last boss...

“If you defeat the Great Demon Lord with Sir Ryousuke then it will birth a new legend. All the riches and prestige within the world will be at the fingertips of our heroes.” She giggled temptingly.

Still...

“After the Great Demon Lord, I'll need to head for the next dungeon.” Noah

was waiting in the Seafloor Temple. Leviathan was waiting for me first, and that was my *real* goal. Everything else was a half measure at best.

“The next dungeon?” she asked after a pause. “Despite the riches and prestige you will gain?” Her expression was baffled.

“There’s someone waiting for me there,” I told her.

“I...see.”

She held an indefinable look on her face. *Uh, did I say something weird?* Her look felt a little cold.

“Hero Makoto,” she said seriously. “Do you intend to imitate the savior’s legend?”

“What?” *Where had that come from?* “His legend?”

“You are unaware? It is a famous story.”

At that, she started to explain.

A thousand years ago, Abel the Savior brought peace to the world by defeating the Great Demon Lord. In the year 0 AS, he gathered the surviving humans and founded Highland. The people wanted him to be king, however, he told them that someone was waiting for him. He then vanished. Afterward, no one ever saw him again, so said the legend.

“I didn’t know,” I told her.

“So...you didn’t,” she replied with a sudden laugh. “Sir Makoto, I hate that story and will be most upset if you imitate it!” She formed a pout, hands on her hips. Princess Noelle sure was an expressive person.

“Why do you hate it?” I asked.

“Because,” she answered sulkily, “he had Anna the Holy Mother as his lover, right? But he told people that someone was waiting for him... That makes it sound like he had another woman, doesn’t it?!”

“Oh.” I got it. It did sound like that, actually. *I wonder if there was truly another woman.*

“Historians give the explanation that he had an elderly mother living out a

modest life back home.”

“That makes sense.”

“Though that detail was added after the fact.”

“What?” *So it was made up?*

“There were no traces of the savior after he vanished, and so they created a plausible story. After all, the scholars couldn’t record that Highland’s first monarch had her lover stolen by another woman!”

“I see... Th-That sounds tough...”

So Highland had been a troublesome country ever since its founding.

“Does the Grandsage not know any details?” She was part of his party back then, after all.

“Well, she maintains that she knows nothing after his disappearance...”

“Hmm...” I had a feeling that she knew *something*, so was there a reason why she couldn’t explain?

“That is why it is so important for Sir Ryoustake to leave a lineage. He has the same skill, and it is common for skills like that to be hereditary.”

“There hasn’t been anyone born with the *Hero of Light* skill in over a thousand years?”

“There has not...it is a major wound to our family.”

“And it appears again after so long...when Sakurai came from another world...”

I sighed. Still, I hadn’t known skills were so important for lineages. I could see why royals like Princess Sophia and Prince Leonardo had such strong skills. So that was why Sakurai would have twenty wives. Or a harem of them, I guess. Oh, he was dancing with someone else. *I wonder which number fiancée she is.*

So the next monarch of Highland will be Princess Noelle...and the heir will be her child?

I took a sidelong look at her. Sakurai had scored a pure beauty like her... He had a blessing all right. Go die in a ditch, man.

She seemed to notice my look and returned a teasing one of her own.

“Oh? Were you perhaps thinking that I should be having a child as well?”

I sputtered. “N-Not at all.”

Did she realize that I was thinking stupid things?! Her face grew even more teasing.

“I am my goddess’s priestess, so I need to remain pure in body. I cannot have a child.”

“Uh...?”

She inferred confusion from my expression and then slipped closer, tugging slightly on my sleeve and bringing her lips to my ear.

“Priestesses need to be virgins, so I don’t have any experience,” she whispered.

“L-Lady Noelle?!”

The salacious words along with the heat of her breath made my body temperature shoot up. *My face is on fire! How can she be so blunt about it?!*

“Oh my, how immodest of me.” She giggled.

She was far more teasing than a princess should be! It made me realize though, that despite all his beautiful fiancées, the most beautiful of them was being made to wait. Too bad, Sakurai.



Even so...

You'll be with your princess once we've defeated the Great Demon Lord, I thought, my estimation of his character rising.

Well, Makoto, it's probably only you who thinks like that, Noah said to me.

That didn't matter, though.

"You seem to be enjoying yourselves, Hero Makoto, Lady Noelle," came a cold voice. The air around us grew more frigid with every word.

S-So cold!

"P-Princess Sophia?" I asked.

"O-Oh, Sophia?"

"You appear to be rather close," she continued, staring at me. Her eyes were as chilly as when she'd caught Lucy sleeping in my room.

"Well, no one was talking to me. Thank you for the conversation, Princess Noelle."

"As the party's host, entertaining guests is a natural requirement," she offered. "Farewell, Sir Makoto."

My thanks and her acceptance given, Princess Noelle left immediately.

There was a pause.

"If you had come to me, I would have spoken with you," Princess Sophia mumbled. I couldn't have walked up to the royal area, though, right?

After that frosty exchange, I spoke with her, Prince Leonardo, and the knights that had gotten friendly with Sasa. Lucy also introduced me to the noblewomen she'd been talking to. The latter half of the party ended up being pretty rousing.

That is...it would've been, if it hadn't been required to make a statement as the newly appointed hero!

You didn't tell me anything about that, Princess Noelle!

I could barely string a sentence together. Please, enough with the sudden absurdities...

Parties in Highland were exhausting.

Chapter 4: Makoto Takatsuki Takes His Goddess's Advice

That night, my dream self awoke in my goddess's space.

"Noah?" I asked.

"Hey there, Makoto."

My goddess was in front of me wearing a wavy party dress. She probably decided to wear it while observing the party earlier. The gown definitely suited her though.

"What's up with the outfit?"

"Cute, right?" she asked with a giggle and a spin.

Hang on! If you do that I'll be able to see up your skirt— or not. Her defenses were as impenetrable as ever.

"You seem to be in a good mood," I said.

"You're doing well at winning over the priestesses and heroes," she replied.

W-Winning over? That was a loaded way of putting it...

"Are you talking about Sakurai and Princess Noelle?"

"Yup. They're rather fond of you. Keep it up, little cutie."

"Highland's tiring," I complained. "I'd rather not stay too long."

The rigid class system and hot-headed hero were a huge aspect of that feeling. There was also a lot of unfair resentment among the citizens, along with nobles that were surprisingly malicious gossips. On top of that, there was a demi-human revolt on the horizon. It was all too much.

Speaking of the uprising, I wonder if Fujiyan got the info he'd been seeking. He did only find out about the problem today.

"Yup, he's narrowed down the leader," Noah answered, reading my mind.

“So quick!” It hadn’t even been a day! What was he, the FBI?! “So,” I continued, “I’m here to talk about how we’re dealing with things?”

“That’s right!” Noah exclaimed. “Let’s hear your thoughts.” She snapped her fingers and a whiteboard appeared in the air.

“We need to stop that revolt, right?”

The Great Demon Lord was on the verge of revival... That meant there was no time for infighting. Plus, it seemed like someone who’d helped Nina in the past was involved in the rebellion.

Noah nodded. “We do. The problem is how. If we prevent the uprising in a way that sows resentment between humans and demi-humans, then our position will be worse going into the fight against the Great Demon Lord.”

She briskly wrote some words across the whiteboard, in Japanese at that.

“So, this is our problem. Why do you think this rebellion is happening *right now*?”

“Well, because they’re unhappy with the caste syst—” *Hang on*, I thought, *is that actually why?*

Highland had a clear division between the spaces for humans and demi-humans. However, the young noblewomen seemed fairly taken with Lucy, and she was an elf. Whatever else was happening, Princess Noelle was against the class system, so those nobles were likely imitating her. I couldn’t imagine Princess Noelle discriminating based on race.

“So it’s not really because of the racial segregation?”

“Maybe not—do you have any ideas?” Noah asked, tapping the board with a black pen. The rebellion was to take place in the capital city. Many humans did live there, but there were also many demi-humans and beastmen. If they fought, it wouldn’t end well for either side. The only people that would gain were...

“The cambions... Has this revolt been engineered by the Snake Sect?”

“I think it’s worth looking into,” answered Noah with a wink.

But...

“Don’t you already know all of this?” I asked. If she did, then I’d rather she tell me... But she actually shook her head.

“The Snake Sect has many fanatical followers of a Daemon, so ‘other gods’ like me can’t see what they’re doing. It’s the same for the followers of Sacred Deities, unfortunately.”

“So the two princesses don’t know either.” I got it...the Snake Sect’s strong faith made it harder for other gods to perceive their intentions, so neither Princess Sophia nor Princess Noelle’s goddesses could warn them of the plot.

“Noelle doesn’t just wield her goddess’s power—she’s also got the right to mobilize the Temple Knights *and* has a lofty position as royalty. She should be the most able to gather information.”

“Oh,” I replied. “Guess I should’ve asked her at the party.”

Although, I considered after a moment, *maybe that’s not really party talk*. There was something else I remembered.

“What about that giant you knew? Can we get him to help?”

“Ah, him. Hmm, maybe not. The Titanea are strong, but they aren’t great with delicate situations. Besides, gods are forbidden from interfering on the mortal plane.”

“They are?” I was thinking that a blessing or item would be all right, but apparently, the gods were forbidden from interfering in mortal wars.

“If the Sacred Deities, Daemons, or Titanea act directly, the land would be decimated. Titanomachy and Gigantomachy destroyed it all once before.”

“Guess that’s a no-go, then.” Sounds like any help from the deities would just make things even worse.

“If you want the giant’s help though, ask for it,” said Noah. “They could hand out a blessing or a strong earth-aligned item.”

The Titanea had the power of the earth elementals, but that didn’t actually benefit us now... Sasa had no aptitude for magic, and Lucy’s had already been strengthened, so I’d have to put off asking for now.

“Oh yeah,” added Noah. “I need to warn you—Althena and I are fighting.”

“You...are?”

Althena was the strongest of the seven goddesses and the goddess with the most faith across the continent.

“She’s too uptight and stubborn. I can’t do any backroom deals like I can in Roses, so take care.”

In Roses, I’d been able to become a hero without converting my faith to the water goddess—this was because Noah had spoken with Eir. Apparently, that kind of arrangement would be more difficult in Highland.

“She also has the most stubborn believers among the goddesses. Pay attention.”

To be honest, I couldn’t imagine that when I’d looked at Princess Noelle, her priestess. Still, if Althena’s disciples were serious about things, then drawing their attention would be a bother. I’d need to be careful and make sure we didn’t cause trouble... After all, I was the (only) believer of a minor wicked deity.

“One last thing.”

It seemed like this was the main point that Noah wanted to make. She wrote “The ninth district” across the board.

“Go to the slums of the ninth district,” she told me.

“The ninth district’s a slum?” I asked. Slums, huh? In an RPG there’d be *something* to find in a place like that.

“Whatever could be in a place like that?” Noah wore a teasing grin.

“I’ll head there. Who’s in that district, by the way?” Fujiyan had only said that the poorest citizens and former criminals lived there.

“The cambions.”

“Cambions live in the capital?!” I demanded.

“They *can* live there, at least. Former criminals and the mafia make homes there, so it isn’t pleasant. But unfortunately for them, they have nowhere else to live.” She seemed disinterested as she spoke.

I got it... The ninth district was the lowest layer of the capital, and if cambions

lived there, then maybe we'd be able to find out something about the Snake Sect.

"Okay, I'll follow your advice and go there."

"Be careful, Makoto," she warned, vanishing as she did.

Well, we had our next destination then.

"It's dark here..." Sasa commented.

"Yeah, I can barely see where I'm going," I replied.

We were currently in the ninth district of Symphonia. Lucy, by the way, was staying back at the inn. Public order wasn't great here, so someone as scantily and provocatively dressed as Lucy would be at risk. Sasa was strong, so I didn't fear for her safety...and I'd honestly be scared if I was on my own. Fujiyan was currently reporting the information he'd gathered about the uprising to Princess Sophia.

The ninth district was a wreck, completely unlike the other places I'd been so far.

"I've heard that the area right by the entrance is the most developed..." I mused.

There was the odd store here and there, but no real hustle to any of them. Lots of places were empty. People were lying on the side of the road, and others were just staring off into space. Some people were sitting on benches smoking. The whole area just exuded an air of degeneracy.

"That's a weird smell," Sasa commented with a frown. There was indeed a stench. Part of it was the smell of trash being left in the drains, letting the water stagnate. But there was another facet, a sweeter component of the odor, which was...

"Weed."

It was a smell I'd experienced in that tavern back in Roses, as well as in the circus tent. Fujiyan had even shown me the real thing once. It looked like tobacco at a glance.

That beastman from yesterday that Nina knew had some in his shop as well...

So was it going around Symphonia as well?

“I’m kinda nervous being able to smell it so easily on the main road,” Sasa commented.

“I guess there are no police here.”

Temple Knights took the role of the police on the western continent. They were an organization affiliated with the churches, so any town with a church would have Temple Knights keeping the peace. They had a presence in Macallan, but they were always drinking with adventurers. That town sure was peaceful...

The ninth district, though, had no sign of them. Was it lawless...?

“Are we being watched?” murmured Sasa.

“Yeah...” I replied. “I can feel it.”

The ninth district’s inhabitants were peering at us with glazed eyes even though we were wearing clothes that fit in. Gradually, some people started walking toward us, flanking and cutting us off from behind.

Gah, they’ve blocked the way.

They were muttering as they slowly moved toward us.

“Let’s run!”

“Got it!”

We darted down a road off the main street. I used my *Mapping* and *Flee* skills to carry on. Sasa was faster than me even without the skill.

H-Hey, wait up!

“Sasa, you’re too fast...” I called out through gasping breaths.

“There’s no one following us anymore,” she pointed out.

We’d come to an open space with no one around. It was a desolate space, just a garden patch field behind a broken fence, with chickens roaming around.

“A field? In the middle of town?”

“Looks like it,” Sasa replied. “They’re growing vegetables.”

It felt different, both from the luxury of the capital and from the entrance area of the slum town. It was almost peaceful here...but not quite. There was a run-down church farther in.

“Stop!” came a yell.

“They’re ours!”

“Don’t take our food!”

It sounded like an argument.

“Oh, who gives a shit?!”

“Who do you think lets you filthy-blooded brats live here!”

The screams came from children and an elderly woman, while the other voices were male and rough-sounding.

“Takatsuki!” Sasa called before running off.

So quick. I chased after her.

Will you help the children?

Yes

No

My *RPG Player* skill was giving me options. *Not that it’s a hard choice this time.*

“You’re trash if you’re picking on little kids like that!” Sasa shouted. There’s no way she would be able to leave children in trouble. She’d gone for a menacing pose, but with how small and cute she was, it was hardly effective.

“You what?” sneered one of the men.

“What’re you playing at?”

“Oh, actually, she’s pretty cute.”

“You into little kids?”

“I ain’t!”

“Then what d’ya like so much about that flat kid?”

Ack, they mocked her chest. She’s gonna be angry...

“You’d better be ready for this,” Sasa said after a pause. There was murder in her voice, you could *hear* the malice. She was even using her *Menace* skill. Scary! There was a chill running down my back and I was *behind* her.

The men immediately screamed and ran. They’d picked the wrong girl to mess with.

“Hmph, that was boring!” Sasa pouted, crossing her arms.

“Sasa, hey, Sasa,” I called out. “Look over here.”

“Hm?” She did and soon noticed that the kids were all on the floor, and one of them had even wet themselves.

“Ahh! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry!”

Both of us apologized deeply.

After that encounter, they showed us into the church. The interior looked just as old as the exterior, but it was maintained, and you could see that people lived here.

“Thank you so much...for helping people such as us.” The elderly woman wearing worn clothes was probably the person in charge of the church, perhaps similar to a nun.

“Thank you!” the children chorused politely. All of their clothes were beaten up as well.

“It’s fine,” Sasa insisted. “I can’t believe they’d be so harsh to such small children.”

“Why did they do that?” I asked.

The woman looked stricken at my question and then began to explain.

“This church is an orphanage. All of the children here have demon blood, so they were abandoned... Those of us that carry such blood are hated...no, despised.”

“Cambions...”

“We are...there are others that call us dirty-blooded.” The woman removed her headpiece to reveal small horns, then replaced it. “Of course, the blood is exceptionally weak and we have no real powers from it. We simply look slightly different than humans... These children are all the same—their looks are the primary reason they become orphaned, as anyone can tell from their appearance that they have demon ancestry.”

“We don’t know what our parents look like...” one offered.

“Because our blood’s dirty...”

“We have to be grateful we are at least allowed to live...”

Their faces looked dark.

“What...on earth?” Sasa was scowling.

“Couldn’t you leave the capital?” I asked.

If they were in another country without a rigid class structure, wouldn’t it be better?

“There are over fifty orphans here...with more arriving each year...” explained the elderly woman.

“I...see...” It wasn’t that simple, then. Besides, they didn’t seem to have the money to be able to move anyway. After all, they were living off the land here.

“In Macallan at least, maybe Fujiwara or Chris would be able to help...?” Sasa said.

She didn’t seem to want to give up. I understood, but looking after so many children wasn’t easy, and Fujiyan wasn’t exactly running a charity.

“Macallan?” the woman asked. “Do you know any adventurers that go by either Jean or Emily?”

Oh, I didn’t expect to hear those names.

“I do. We’ve even been in an adventuring party with them before.”

“Is that so?! Are they doing well?” Her expression had suddenly brightened. Apparently, they had been raised here. Come to think of it, those two *had*

mentioned that they were brought up in an orphanage in Highland.

So that meant...

“They’re...cambions?”

“Ah...” The woman looked aghast with herself. She must have assumed she’d let it slip.

“We’re otherworlders, so we don’t really care,” I reassured her.

“O-Otherworlders? You’re legendary heroes?!”

“Nope, just non-legendary heroes.”

She looked confused, so I gave her introductions.

“I never expected to meet the State-Authorized Hero of Roses!” she exclaimed in shock.

“You’re so great, mister!”

“Wooow, cool!”

“A hero...that’s amazing.”

The kids were all excited. They were going to make me blush.

“You’re grinning, Takatsuki,” Sasa said to me.

“You can’t blame me.”

“Nope, it’s great,” she remarked happily.

“Jean and Emily are doing fine, then?” pressed the elderly woman. “They haven’t been adventurers for long, but they send money back to us. It cannot be an easy life for them...” Even so, the woman was smiling.

I had no idea that Jean was doing that... We spent a little longer talking about them, and the woman’s smile grew as we did.

“I see... So they’re lovers now.”

“They didn’t use to be?” I asked. They’d seemed that way when we’d first met.

“Emily acted like his older sister while they were here. She was worried when

Jean decided he'd become an adventurer, so she decided to follow him." Her voice was filled with nostalgia.

"Oh, really? I'll have to remind Jean about that at some point."

"You're so mean, Takatsuki," Sasa needled.

I'd have to at least *mention* it to him... It'd make for some interesting conversation.

Of course, we could go on talking about Jean and Emily the whole time—this was an orphanage for cambions, so I figured they might have some information.

"This church...is dedicated to Althena," I noted, peering up at the statue of the sun goddess.

"There are no other churches in Highland," the woman explained.

"Oh...that's like in Roses." It seemed as if this country was as strict with religion as I'd heard. "By the way," I said afterward, nonchalantly trying to nudge us onto our main topic. "Have you heard of the Snake Sect?"

The moment I said it, her face sharpened. "Do you think we follow that Daemon?!"

"N-No!"

"Not at all!" Sasa and I both shook our heads frantically.

"Their cruel acts make their brethren suffer! They attack humans indiscriminately and spread that foul weed around, trying to bring chaos to the world. And then, the hate they stir up is directed at us powerless cambions..."

Eventually, she seemed to lose her steam. So the people here were just more of the Snake Sect's victims... Part of what she'd said stuck with me, though.

"They're the ones spreading the weed?"

"They are. Everyone in the district knows it. The sales let them gain money for their activities. Someone claiming affiliation with them even asked us if we would cultivate it. Naturally, we turned them down."

"They were going to use these children?" Sasa asked, a dangerous look on her face. "They won't get away with this."

So...there was a connection between the weed and the Snake Sect.

“We’re looking for them,” I explained. “One of them caused a group of monsters to rampage in Roses’s capital, and he said that Symphonia was their next target.”

“How awful,” the woman said with a pained look.

“It doesn’t matter how small the detail might be—do you know anything?”

One of the children that had been listening suddenly piped up. “Maybe the water tunnels...”

“The water tunnels?” Sasa and I asked in unison.

“There are huge tunnels beneath the city that transport water and act as drainage.”

“There are rumors...that the mafia or the Snake Sect have hideouts within them.”

“I told the kids not to go near them because of the abductions,” the woman added, “but...”

Well, that certainly sounded like an *interesting* place. I didn’t know there were places like that here. “Underground tunnels through Symphonia...”

“Are you planning on going into them?” inquired Sasa, seemingly surprised.

Will you explore the water tunnels?

Yes

No

Today was a day of decisions, it seemed.

“Let’s go, Sasa.”

“Sure, sure, let’s!” She laughed, but it sounded conflicted.

So be it. Our next destination was the water tunnels.

“This is the entrance,” said the cambion boy that had guided us. He looked uneasily in our direction. “Are you really going inside?”

“We’ll be fine, and if it looks too risky, we’ll come right out,” I assured him.

“You say that, but you seem really excited,” Sasa snarked. She saw right through me.

We were in front of something that looked like a big well. I peered into the round hole built of bricks and could see that it descended into the ground. There was a rusted ladder clinging to the side that we’d have to use to get underground.

“We’ll be back soon,” I told him.

“Take care,” the boy replied with uncertainty. He watched us as we climbed down.

“So dark...” I muttered. “Sasa, are you all right?” There wasn’t much light down here, so it was almost pitch black. I was using my *Night Vision* skill.

“What? I can see just fine. It’s brighter than it was in Labyrinthos.”

“O-Oh.” Well, I shouldn’t have expected any different, considering *that’s* where she’d grown up.

“I’m happy, though. I was imagining something much dirtier when they brought these tunnels up, but the water’s even clean.”

“It comes from the Centrin River that flows past the city, and is connected to the sea farther downstream,” I explained.

“Oh, is it?”

The tunnel was a few meters wide, almost like a small river. There was a narrow footpath to the side, but I used water walking to stride across the water’s surface instead.

Sasa’s hand was in mine, just as cool as ever.



“This is convenient, but aren’t there monsters underwater?” she asked. “Like sea serpents?”

“Sasa, we’re not in Labyrinthos right now,” I said with a strained grin. There wouldn’t be any monsters in the tunnels, since Symphonia would certainly have a barrier in place to repel them.

“About the only thing there’d be here are class zeroes,” I told her.

“What’s a class zero?”

“Oh, it refers to a monster’s danger level. The adventurer’s guild determines them. Class zeroes can be taken down by even an average person.”

I took the opportunity to explain the classification of monster strength in this world. It was a scale from zero to eight. Classes four and above were also called calamities.

“It’s so carefully divided up,” Sasa said in admiration.

“You’re one of those last four, by the way.”

“Wha?! I-I’m a calamity?!”

She was utterly shocked. So she hadn’t realized... Honestly, she didn’t have a good gauge of her own strength.

There were smaller tunnels that split off around us—the main tunnel was around five meters wide, while the tributary tunnels were only two or three meters wide.

I was going slowly, using *Mapping* to make sure we didn’t get lost. It was much more pleasant than a dungeon though because we didn’t have to worry about monsters. We did, however, have to look out for the Snake Sect or the mafia. It would be bad if we were spotted. Regardless, we hadn’t come across anyone yet, so it was like taking a casual stroll through the tunnels.

“Sasa, stop,” I said suddenly as my *Scout* skill reacted.

“Yeah, I can hear footsteps... More than one set.”

We used *Stealth* to hide. Was this the Snake Sect? If so, we’d hit the jackpot. Sasa and I held our breaths and waited.

The steps were strangely “clacky,” but eventually, figures appeared. They were humanoid but lacked any meat... Just bones...but they were moving.

They were undead.

“Skeletons?!” I exclaimed quietly.

“See, there *are* monsters,” Sasa replied.

Weird...what had happened to the barrier?

“What should we do?” she asked.

“Hmm, we could just ignore them...”

There was an important concept in dungeon clearing—always try to take out any monsters you come across to avoid getting caught in a pincer on your way out. Lucas—a veteran—had constantly warned us to make sure we always had an escape route cleared.

“Let’s take them down.”

“Got it.”

The tunnels had a plentiful supply of water, which would act as my weapon. Fortunately, there were plenty of water elementals here as well.

Just as I was about to use my water magic to deal with them, Sasa gave a slight cheer. Her hammer suddenly grew in size, and she crushed all three of them in one blow. There was a crunch as the skeletons broke into pieces.

“Whoa...” I whispered.

“Wait... That was it?”

The former skeletons were now bone fragments that’d simply smacked against the wall. She’d cleared them in a single hit...

Well, on we go.

“Skeletons, more skeletons, zombies, even more skeletons...there’s quite a few of them,” I commented, listing off what we’d come across so far.

“And they’re all undead,” Sasa grumbled with a tired look. It hadn’t taken

more than one hit for her to defeat any of them. I'd expect no less, but something was bothering me.

"They're always in groups of three."

"It's not a coincidence?"

"Three-man teams are used for troops..." I mused. "Someone's pulling their strings." A necromancer with moon magic would be able to control the skeletons and zombies, which meant there was a high chance someone was controlling these. "Could it be related to the cambions...or the Snake Sect?" I wondered.

"Maybe we should head back?" Sasa suggested.

She'd been unstoppable so far, but now she seemed nervous. I'd want to avoid anything stronger as well, so I was about to agree, but then we heard someone shout.

"H-Help! Damn it all!"

An adventurer? Or maybe...

"Takatsuki, we have to help!" Sasa wasn't the wait-and-see type. It was kinda manly, actually.

We rushed toward the scream and saw a young man screeching, surrounded by skeletons and zombies.

We had to do something!

"*Water Magic: Water Dragon!*" I cast, sending the magic toward the man.

"Gah!" The spell only impacted the man, carrying him away. Now there was some distance between him and the monsters.

"Sasa!" I called.

"Got it!"

There was a loud thud as Sasa's massive hammer swiped through the air and sent the undead horde flying. There were about twenty of them.

"I'm done," she immediately reported.

“Already?!”

It hadn’t even taken a minute... I was glad she was with me.

“What about the guy?”

“Passed out. Come on, wake up,” I called, lightly slapping his cheeks.

He looked to be around twenty or so, with...dog? Or maybe wolf ears. The darkness made it hard to tell, but his clothes looked pretty high-quality.

And that was despite being in the ninth district. Hmm...who was this person?

“Ugh... What happened?” groaned the man as he stirred awake. “Am I dead?”

“You’re alive.”

“Y-You two!” He quickly backed away, but then he saw the array of monsters—or more accurately, the chunks they’d been turned into—and just stared in shock.

“You took them all out. Who in the... It doesn’t matter—you saved me. My thanks.”

“You’re quite welcome,” I told him.

Sasa shrunk her hammer again.

“My name’s Peter Castor. You can call me Brother if you like,” he grinned, offering an exaggerated bow. It ended up coming across as a bit pretentious.

“I’m Makoto Takatsuki and this is Aya Sasaki. We’re adventurers from Roses.” I left out the bit about being a hero.

“Why are you here of all places? Oh...getting rid of the monsters. Well, you sure saved me at least. The guild works fast!”

Peter nodded to himself in acceptance, apparently not finding us suspicious. I couldn’t just ask him if he knew anything about the Snake Sect out of nowhere, so we’d have to carry on with the small talk.

“Are there often monsters down here?” I asked.

“Come on, Brother! Of course not! I’m down here a lot, but this is the first time I’ve come across the undead!”

So there *weren't* normally monsters here after all. Something strange had to be going on.

"We took down at least ten groups of skeletons and zombies on our way, though," Sasa told him.

"Whoa, for real, little miss?! We're not going to be able to get work done down here, then!" He seemed dismayed to hear it.

"We're going now—want to come with?" I offered.

"Sure! I 'ppreciate it! I was with my friends, but we split up," he explained happily.

"You don't want to look for them?"

"I stayed back as bait, they'll have already gotten out."

He was still thinking of his friends at least, so despite where we'd met him, he didn't seem like a *bad* person.

"Let's go, then."

"I'll lead the way," he suggested before explaining proudly. "I've been coming here since I was a kid. I know the place like the back of my hand."

Weren't kids steered away from the tunnels, though?

Every time any undead showed up, Sasa would pound them down with her hammer and a quiet yell.

"You're really something, little miss. There's nothing left of them!" Peter exclaimed.

"Takatsuki's even stronger," she replied.

Hold on! You don't need to say that.

"Wicked, Brother. What rank are you? You famous?"

"I'm a silver rank, but only because of Sasa's help," I explained the misunderstanding, showing him my metal badge.

"I get you. Keep your trump card in reserve, huh?"

You don't get me at all...

“By the way, what were you doing down here, Peter?” Since we were keeping up the small talk, I decided to sound him out.

“Come on, you don’t need to be so formal. You can even call me Pete, Brother! I was here for work. We’d had a meeting, but they never showed, then the monsters turned up. It’s definitely been a day! Worth it to meet you two, though! I’ll have to thank Ira!” Peter offered a prayer as he grabbed the fine gold chain around his neck.

He’s praying to the Goddess of Fortune, Ira... I’m pretty sure he’s not part of the Snake Sect, then.

Their members all followed the Daemon Typhon, and according to Noah, they were zealots, so they wouldn’t pray to other deities even as an act.

Ira is related to luck and business, so many of her believers are merchants...

“That’s awful, Pete. Is the exit around here?” I asked.

“Yup, it’s here! I’m sure of it.”

He was right—we stepped out of the tunnels in a different place than we’d entered.

“Too bright!”

“My eyes aren’t used to it!”

Sasa and I both shielded our eyes as we stepped out of the dim tunnels and into the bright sunlight. I wanted some sunglasses.

“Brother, you need these if you’re going under!”

I looked at Peter and saw him wearing...sunglasses. So they had those, even in this world.

Just then, I heard some noisy footsteps approaching.

“Cap!”

“Are you safe?!”

“Are you hurt?!”

They belonged to a bunch of rough-looking men with short hair and tattoos!

All of them had sunglasses too! Who were they?

“Listen up! These two saved my life! Don’t be rude!” His earlier easygoing demeanor had vanished and his voice now sounded threatening.

“Our apologies, Cap!” they chorused.

Sasa and I just made confused noises before looking back at Peter.

“Sorry, Brother! I haven’t got the time today, so we’ll thank you in the future. Take this as a symbol of that pledge.” Peter handed me a gold badge with some crest on it. “Be seeing you!”

With that, the black-clad men surrounded him, and then they all left.

Sasa and I just looked at each other.

“Hey, Takatsuki...”

Yup, I knew what she wanted to say.

“Pete’s one of the mafia.”

The Goddess of Fortune, Ira, was a goddess popular with merchants and the mafia.

“Takatsuki...what’d they mean by Cap?”

“Uhhh, maybe *capo*? It’s a title in the mafia, I think.”

“What do we do now?” she asked.

“Let’s... Let’s just go back.”

“Yeah...”

We ended up leaving the ninth district without discovering any sign of the Snake Sect.

When we returned to the inn, a summons to the castle was waiting for us.

Chapter 5: Makoto Takatsuki Is Called to Highland Castle

The Room of Silver Wings was not on the top floor of Highland Castle, but the one just below it. The highest floor was reserved only for royalty, so this room was the best place for non-royal people of high status to gather.

“Uh, Princess Sophia, who is everyone again?” I asked in a whisper.

“I will say this once more, Hero Makoto,” she replied equally quietly, murmuring a list of names to me:

- The first prince of Highland, Gaius Highland.
- The second prince, Juliano Highland.
- The second princess, Cardinal in the Church of the Sun Goddess, Noelle Althena Highland.
- Pope Roma Bolgia of the Church of the Sun Goddess.
- Head of the Eastern Domain, Archduke Micheal Roland.
- Head of the Western Domain, Archduke Marco Whitehouse.
- Head of the Southern Domain, Archduke Lorenzo Baileys.
- Head of the Northern Domain, Archduke Bartolomeo Ballantine.
- Prime Minister Vittorio Whiteheather.
- Commander in chief of the Soleil Knights, Owain Bladnoch.

Those were all the leaders of Highland, and everyone was gathered around a massive round table.

“Have you got it?” she asked quietly.

“Sorry...not a chance, Princess.”

“Very well,” she replied with a sigh, then giggled slightly. “I will tell you again later.”

I’d never be able to remember all of them. I glanced over the assembly again, and the nobles didn’t look in the greatest of moods.

“Where is His Majesty?” asked Archduke something-or-other as he rested his chin on a hand.

“His Majesty is not well, so he will be absent from today’s meeting,” the prime minister guy answered.

“Again? That is a concern, king or not.”

“The only other person missing is...the Grandsage. As ever, I suppose.”

Apparently, the Grandsage was constantly playing hooky.

“Did you have something to say that warranted taking up our precious time, Noelle?” asked the first prince. There was an implicit “get started” in his tone that went unspoken, but not unheard.

Honestly, though, that felt like a harsh thing to say to his own sister.

“I would have Princess Sophia explain,” Princess Noelle replied.

“Ah, I had wondered who was sitting off to the side over there,” one of the archdukes commented disinterestedly. “Now I see it is a pretty little princess from some minor state.”

“You mustn’t be so disdainful. That minor nation’s State-Authorized Hero defeated a hero of Highland, after all,” another person added with a chuckle.

“Do you wish to say something, Lord Marco?”

“Not at all, Lord Bartolomeo. How *is* your son, incidentally?”

“Tch...”

Lord Ballantine was glaring our way. Princess Sophia kept a completely blank and composed expression, which was pretty impressive. On the other hand, *I* could practically feel an ulcer coming on, and frankly, I just wanted to go home. How’d this end up happening?

◇ Several Hours Earlier ◇

Fujiyan, Nina, and Princess Sophia were at the inn when we got back. Lucy was probably with the Grandsage...? Either way, Fujiyan rushed over to Sasa and me.

“Hi again, Fujiyan.”

“My esteemed Tackie!” he exclaimed. “We have found the ringleader of the rebellion.”

“Already?!” Sasa exclaimed in shock.

Yeah, it was pretty fast. I’d heard from Noah, but Fujiyan’s information gathering capabilities were impressive.

“Lord Fujiwara is a capable man,” Princess Sophia added.

“How come you’re here, Princess?” I asked.

“My attendance was requested at Highland Castle later, and I decided it would be worth confirming the latest information in regards to the rebellion. However, Lord Fujiwara has gathered far more information than my sources have managed to collect. Incidentally, Hero Makoto, Aya Sasaki, I was told that you had both ventured into the ninth district. Were you in danger?”

She’d been worried... I could tell from her tone.

“Nothing real—”

“It was awful!” Sasa cut across me. “We got chased by guys from the slums, then attacked underground by the undead! And then there was the mafia! Takatsuki wanted to check it out right away!!! Hmph!”

Huh? Actually, we went through quite a bit of trouble, didn’t we?

“What did you just say?” Fujiyan asked.

“The undead?!”

“Really’h?!”

Everyone had something to say about that.

“There were a bunch of skeletons and zombies in the underground water tunnels,” I said, and then I gave a simple explanation of what’d happened.

“To think that the tunnels were in such a state...”

“You met the Castor family capo’h?!”

“If the spread of weed is so vast...”

Princess Sophia, Nina, and Fujiyan each had different points from my story

that'd shocked them, and Princess Sophia's facial expression was the most severe.

"Hero Makoto, please accompany me to Highland Castle," she said.

"What? But I wanted to get something to eat..."

"This information is something that Lady Noelle should hear as soon as possible."

"R-Right..."

And so, I was dragged along to the castle. Everyone else stayed back as we went to the castle to see Princess Noelle.

...I'm hungry, I thought to myself.

Back in the present, Princess Sophia had finished giving an overview to all the nobles at the table.

"The beastmen and demi-humans are rebelling? Those ignorant animals."

"We have been too lax. We should put them all back into slavery at once."

"I cannot counsel that, considering the Great Demon Lord's revival is imminent. There are a great many beastmen and demi-humans in both Springrogue and Great Keith and enslavement will invite objections from them."

"It would also have an effect on our Northern Front Plan."

So far, I hadn't said a word, but just vaguely listened to the conversation.

"The details can be dealt with later—we just need to capture the ringleader and put them to the sword." That extreme suggestion had come from...Gerald's father! Like son, like father... They're both hotheaded. Actually, I guess it's like father, like son.

"Whatever their plan, it has yet to be carried out. We have to consider other countries, so perhaps the agitators should instead be indefinitely imprisoned." The one who'd spoken was a seemingly mild man...the pope. He argued against execution.

"Does it matter?" The second prince still seemed utterly bored.

“In either case, we shall use the list Lady Sophia has gathered to apprehend those behind the rebellion so we can interrogate them. Is this acceptable?” There was silence from all, and no one objected to Princess Noelle’s proposal. With a smile, she said, “Then let us continue to the next topic.”

It seemed like she was chairing the meeting.

“Undead in the water tunnels...it’s a real nuisance.”

“Could this perhaps be negligence on the Temple Knights’ part as they protect our capital, Pope Roma?” The unpleasant archduke grinned toward the pope. It was the same one that had provoked Gerald’s dad earlier.

“I will issue an emergency order for the Temple Knights to survey the tunnels. However, nothing of the like has happened beyond the barrier before. Would you not agree that the root cause is more important?”

“It will never be discovered so easily.”

“Not at all—it is simple. Undead are created through necromancy, and necromancy is aligned with the accursed moon. That reminds me...was someone not responsible for allowing the Priestess of the Moon to escape recently?”

“That would imply a connection between the priestess and the Snake Sect and—” The first prince had lost his composure. *Was it his fault then?* “—her escape means a loss of everything.”

“A Temple Knight has given a report that they had contact with her the other day in the sixth district. It seems unlikely that she is connected with the events in the tunnels.”

“I wonder about that. Incidentally, how is said Temple Knight?”

“The curse cannot be broken. They are currently being treated.”

“Lady Sophia,” I murmured, “what does she mean?”

“The Priestess of the Moon,” she replied, “is proficient in darkness and curse magic. I will explain the details later.”

Hmm, dark magic. I’m kinda interested... It’s so cool.

“Now, now, the undead are not *necessarily* related to her. The issue, however, is how strong those undead are.”

“For that, I would ask Hero Makoto here to explain,” said Princess Sophia.

Wait, you’re bringing me into this?

For the first time, everyone turned to look at me.

“Uh, an adventurer companion and I went into the tunnels in the ninth district. We thought there might be some clues there about the Snake Sect, but we only found undead. We defeated fifteen or so, and that was all we encountered.”

“Fifteen is a lot...” someone commented.

“And yet two adventurers defeated them, so they must not be a massive problem.”

“How can you say that?! The hero over there is a strong fighter that defeated even our Hero of Lightning! *Any* monster would be nothing to him!” proclaimed an archduke.

Come on... Every time Gerald gets brought up his dad glares at me! Can you not? Seriously, could this man be less pleasant?!

“A thousand Temple Knights are currently exterminating the undead within the tunnels. I imagine that they will be defeated imminently.” The pope smiled. He seemed pretty chill.

“Then all that remains is to capture the priestess.”

“It is only a matter of time. If we keep up with the inspections, she will be unable to escape the capital.”

“The weakening of the barrier within the water tunnels is a blind spot we missed. However, we will have to improve it.”

They’d all gone into chatter mode, so I guessed that my time in the spotlight was finally over.

“Finally,” Princess Noelle announced, surveying everyone.

“There’s still more?” the second prince interrupted. “Forget it, just do what

you like.” Guess he wanted to go home.

“There have been reports that the number of monsters in the forest near the capital has increased significantly as of late. Using monsters to attack towns and villages is a favored tactic of the Snake Sect, and one they have recently used in Roses’s capital.”

“The Snake Sect doesn’t have superior manpower or weapons, so all they can do is use monsters.”

“That doesn’t make it a bad tactic. Particularly, their recent attacks have used stronger monsters.”

“Hmph, there is no comparison between the defensive capabilities of Symphonia and Roses’s capital! We currently have the Soleil Knights, the Temple Knights, *and* the Four Cardinal Knights here. A demon lord is nothing to fear!”

The second prince sure was confident. Then again, Highland’s combat potential was definitely reassuring.

“It is unclear whether this plot is connected with the Snake Sect, but we are aware that the group which caused chaos in Horn has pinpointed Symphonia as their next target. Optimism is dangerous.” Princess Noelle turned to face the commander in chief. “Lord Owain, please see to the protection of the capital.” He had thus far remained silent and listening, and only just now offered a word of acknowledgment to the princess’s order.

“Then I declare this meeting concluded. We offer our thanks to Althena.”

The meeting was over...and I was exhausted.

“We will part here, then,” Princess Sophia said with her usual aloof expression. “I must speak with Lady Noelle.”

But...

She looks kinda tired as well...

I remembered Prince Leonardo asking me to help her. Was there anything I could do to get her some energy back?

“Princess Sophia?”

“Yes? What is it?” she asked, turning back to face me. She was gorgeous.

“Would you like to go out for dinner at some point?”

“Wha?!”

“Ah, just if you wan—” I started, trying to placate her, but she immediately grabbed my hand and shushed me.

“It is a promise.”

“R-Right...”

Well, that was certainly a vigorous commitment. Maybe eating some good food would perk her up? I’d have to ask Fujiyan for a good place. She stepped up to the royal level where Princess Noelle was waiting, and then I made my way down the stairs.

Oh yeah, isn’t Lucy training with the Grandsage? I asked myself.

I’d kept my distance from the Grandsage recently because I didn’t want to end up getting my blood sucked, but maybe I should check that training out.

“Actually, Lucy probably hasn’t eaten dinner yet...”

Maybe I could invite her to a tavern somewhere. With a hand on my stomach, I made my way to the Grandsage’s estate. I pushed open the glistening doors of ice and walked into the darkness.

“Excuuuse me...” I called out.

I walked into a room and was met by a load of flickering flames, along with flame-colored hair that I could recognize even from behind. I saw that the flames around her weren’t magic, but were candles. There was a puff as a spark flew through the air, causing a new candle to flicker into life.

“Hmm, around a minute. Not bad,” the Grandsage said in satisfaction. Lucy must have noticed my presence because she turned toward me.

“Makoto! Did you see?!”

“Whoa!”

She’d grabbed onto me. She was as warm as ever.

“I lit them all without a chant!!!”

I looked at Lucy’s smiling face and then at the more than twenty candles around us. She’d done that in a minute?!

“Oh, so you can use chantless spells now, then?” A mage needed over level fifty magic mastery to do that.

“Barely,” the Grandsage interrupted in exasperation. “We need to do something about using her king rank fire magic at such a low proficiency level.”

As a skill got stronger, higher proficiency got more important. It made sense—stronger weapons were more difficult to use, after all.

“Well done, Lucy,” I congratulated her. That had to have taken a lot of effort.

“Thanks! What’re you doing here, though? Did you come to see me?”

“Yeah. I thought I’d see the Grandsage about training as well.” After all, she was the strongest mage on the continent, so it would be a waste not to use her talent.

“Very well,” chuckled the woman in question. “You know what comes first though, don’t you?”

She dragged her finger through the air, beckoning me.

Yeah...

“Here,” I said after a sigh, offering my neck to her. She latched on and her sharp fangs gave me a dull ache. I could feel my body getting hotter as she took my blood.

“How does it taste, Grandsage?” I asked.

There was no reply, at least verbally. Instead, she lightly smacked the back of my head. Did that mean I tasted good? Another ten seconds or so passed.

She let out a satisfied sigh before licking her reddened lips. There was an obscenity to the act that didn’t match her young appearance... Actually, it was kinda hot. My heart racing, I faced her again.

“So, you want some training as well, Elementalist?”

“Yes, please.” Lucy had gotten way better in just a few days, so I was pretty

hopeful.

“Show me your magic, then. Put out the candles she lit without using an incantation.”

“Makoto’s magic is so fast, Grandsage!” Lucy exclaimed.

“Oh? Then I’ll look forward to it,” she replied with a grin.

Lucy, you don’t need to up the difficulty...

“On my mark then. Now.”

As she gave the signal, I froze the wicks of all the candles. As they went out, the room was plunged into darkness. Hmm, it took around a second?

“How’d I do?” I asked.

“Aww, same as always with your stupid fast magic,” Lucy whined. She was used to seeing my magic.

I glanced toward the Grandsage and saw that she was giving me a puzzled look.

“You... How did you do that?”

“Uh? I just cast without chanting.”

“Did he do something strange, Grandsage?” Lucy asked.

Neither of us knew why she was surprised.

“Redheaded elf,” said the Grandsage, “how did you pick your targets when you cast without the chant?”

“What? Well, I just looked at each one...hang on! Makoto, you...”

“Elementalist, you extinguished the candles behind you all at once, without focusing on them.”

Oh, that’s what caused their shock.

“It’s just a skill,” I explained. “I can alter my perspective as I like.” I went on to explain the details of my *RPG Player* skill. It wasn’t particularly suited for combat, but it was convenient because I could avoid blind spots.

“I see...you used your water magic by channeling it through that skill. Clever.

Your precision is also incredible.”

As she spoke, she snapped her fingers and the candles burst back to life, illuminating the room once more.

“They don’t call you Grandsage for nothing,” I commented. The magic that I could do seemed like nothing to her.

“Awww...and it took me more than a minute.”

Lucy was still feeling down, but her magic used to take longer than three minutes to cast, so she had already made impressive strides in her training.

“Don’t get discouraged, Redhead. It took me a hundred years to get there,” said the Grandsage.

Lucy and I both let out noises of confusion.

“How long have you been learning magic, Elementalist?” asked the Grandsage.

“Uh, about two years.”

Her exasperated look and Lucy’s stare seemed to pin me in place. *What?*

“I mean, I only have *Water Magic (Low Rank)*.” I couldn’t use any other elements, and I couldn’t increase the rank of my power either, so all I *could* increase was my proficiency.

“There should still be a limit... Your mastery right now is...two hundred?”

“What?! But before, you said it was only one-fifty!” Lucy exclaimed.

The Grandsage had used her *Appraisal* to reveal my stat.

“It went up again,” I argued, defending myself.

“I-I’ll never catch up...”

“This is bad. You have already exceeded *my* mastery level,” griped the Grandsage. “If anything, I want you to teach me how you got it that high.”

“What?! Teach me *something* at least!” After all, I’d already lost my blood.

“Don’t be like that. Do you want some kind of weapon? I cannot give you a national treasure, but I have plenty of valuable weapons lying around.”

“Hmm, I’m not that strong, so I can only use a dagger.”

I showed her the dagger that Noah had given me. Fujiyan had told me that it was on par with a national treasure, so she probably didn’t have anything better.

“This...is a divine weapon. I have nothing which would compete.” The Grandsage folded her arms and thought. I must have bothered her. She was actually surprisingly conscientious.

“I’ll ask you for help if I need it,” I suggested.

“Sorry,” she answered. “Come for help any time.”

We gave our farewells and then Lucy and I left.

As we were on our way back to the inn, my stomach started protesting.

“Hey, Lucy, let’s get some food,” I suggested.

“Sure, where from?”

Hmm, where indeed? We ended up in a chic bar in the sixth district. I ordered a mutton and vegetable sandwich along with a seafood pasta dish.

“It’s rare to see you eat this much,” Lucy commented.

“A lot happened today, and I’m tired.”

“Oh, what? Come on, tell me,” Lucy wheedled, scooching nearer to my side from her own seat at the bar. She was close...

I evenly told her about what had happened as if it wasn’t bothering me.

“That’s about it,” I finished up.

“Wait... You went to Jean and Emily’s orphanage in the ninth district, searched the underground tunnels, fought the undead, met a mafia capo, and then went to a meeting of the leaders of the country?”

“Yeah. Now that I think about it, even more happened...”

It’d been a busy day.

“Y-You and Aya did so much adventuring while I was gone...”

“But it was Fujiyan that found the culprit,” I said.

“He really is incredible...” Lucy murmured.

Yep, that’s my friend—OP skill and all.

“Training’s going well for you though, right?”

“Yeah! The Grandsage knows so much about magic. She’s good at teaching too!”

“Hmm...”

That was nice. Lucy had the *High Wizard* skill, as well as *Fire Magic (King Rank)*, and the best mage on the continent was teaching her.

“Looks like it was a good idea to learn *Serenity* and *Concentration* like you suggested.” she added.

“That’s good,” I said, listening as I munched on my sandwich.

She’d spent most of the time practicing casting without an incantation. Apparently, in the dark ages of the Great Demon Lord, there hadn’t been a single mage that took time to chant out spells. Sounds like what you’d expect from someone like the Grandsage with experience from a millennium ago.

There was a traveling band playing in the bar, and we enjoyed our meal together while listening to them.

“It feels like it’s been too long since we did this,” Lucy commented with a meaningful look.

“Why? We see each other every day.”

“Hmm, well, we do, but it’s been a while since we’ve had drinks with just the two of us, hasn’t it?”

“Ah, maybe.”

Recently, there had been a lot of times we’d had Sasa, Fujiyan, or someone else with us. The last night out between just Lucy and I had probably been before we’d first formed the party with Fujiyan, Sasa, and Nina. Thinking about it made me feel all nostalgic.

Back when Lucy and I had first teamed up, I hadn’t known what to talk about

and I'd been nervous about how beautiful she was. But now, she was a friend that I could talk with really easily. Although...

"Say, Lucy, it feels like you're pretty close to me today."

It almost felt like her shoulder was always against mine, and she'd been running a finger up and down my arm for a while now. It kinda tickled. Plus, her face was close, although not so close that I could feel her breath on my face.

"Are you turned on?" she asked.

"Not really," I lied after a minute. If I was being honest with myself, I hadn't been able to calm down for a while.

"Ohhh, that's weird. I learned this from those Highland noblewomen."

"Learned...what?"

"That this'll wrap any guy around your little finger." She giggled.

So the nobility *did* use their feminine wiles like that? Fujiyan had said that Chris'd been pretty aggressive before they got engaged. Noble society was scary...

A bell tolled four times in the distance.

"What was that?" I asked.

"The bells of peace," Lucy replied. "The watch at each of the four gates ring bells to say that there's nothing wrong."

"Oh." I hadn't known that.

"It's also a signal for shift change for the Temple Knights."

"I see."

So it was to mark the difference between the day and night shifts as well. That was practical. The sun had already set, but the capital was still well-lit and not at all dark.

"Hey, let's drink some more!" Lucy demanded with a competitive look. She clinked our glasses together.

I averted my gaze from her cleavage as it entered my eyeline. When I looked

back, I offered a warning. “We won’t be able to get up if we drink too much.”

“It’s fine,” she replied. “I’ve gotten better at holding my drink recently.”

“Reeeally?” I asked doubtfully. Well, I *had* done a whole bunch of work today... It couldn’t hurt to let our hair down once in a while.

“Let’s toast to a day’s hard work,” I said eventually.

“Right!” She nodded with a smile.

Several hours later, Lucy was complaining that she couldn’t walk.

Come on, you’re wasted!

“We’re staying in the third district, so we need to keep going... Want some water?”

I would’ve liked to do the manly thing and carry her back, but I was tired too, and honestly, I didn’t have the stamina.

“Heyyy, Makoto... We’re tired—let’s go there.”

“Where?”

I followed her pointing finger to see a gaudy sign in front of an inn.

“Two hours: 4,000 G. The night: 10,000 G.” was written on it.

Wait...this might be... Well, there was no “might” about it.

It’s a love hotel! Noah cheered.

So she’d been watching.

Chop chop, time to accept, she answered.

“Let’s go inside, Makoto,” urged Lucy. “Don’t worry, I won’t do anything.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s meant to be my line!” I balked.



“Come on, come on,” she chanted, pulling me along by force.

“Wait!”

I couldn’t resist her strength with my own. Gradually, she managed to pull me inside.

“And now you’ve just gone to sleep!”

A soft snore was my only answer.

No sooner had we paid and stepped into the room than she’d cheered at the sight of the bed, jumped into it, and then promptly passed out.

I might’ve been able to wake her up, but there was one problem: “Why’d she have to strip?”

Lucy was currently in bed without a stitch of clothing on her. Sasa had said that she tossed and turned a lot and soon ended up undressed... But now that it’d happened, I couldn’t look.

Of course you can, hell, you can make a move as well, Noah insisted wickedly.

That’s enough of that, goddess. *Calm Mind.*

It seemed like the final trial of my busy day was going to be lustful temptation coming from my teammate.

In the end, I spent the night on the sofa in the room.

“We’re back,” I called.

“Gah, my head.”

“Oh, Takatsuki, Lu, you’re both back bright and early,” Sasa remarked from where she’d come to greet us. Her voice was cheerful, but I didn’t like that look in her eye. Also, the hammer in her hand wasn’t easing my mind much either.

“It seems like you had fun, Hero Makoto,” came the cold voice of Princess Sophia.

“Fun’s not the word...” Lucy had a hangover, so I’d needed to carry her back.

Suddenly, Fujiyan and Chris came rushing in.

“This is urgent!” Fujiyan exclaimed.

“Look at this!” Chris followed up, handing me a letter.

It was an invitation from the Castor family of the ninth district...from one of their capo, Peter Castor, to be precise. The Castors were a famous mafia family, known as one of the three main families of Highland.

Though I only just found that out... I thought.

Peter’s family was a big player in the undercity. I’d imagined him as part of a more minor family since he hadn’t seemed all that strong in the tunnels.

“The Castor, Shaula, and Denebola families run the underworld in the city,” Fujiyan explained, along with telling me about their subordinate organizations that were spread across the continent.

“The Castor family are the mafia that runs gambling rings...right’h?” Nina looked like she’d bitten into a lemon. What was wrong?

“Nina owed her debt to the mafia in Great Keith. I bought her out of it after she’d become a slave.”

“Ahhhh’h! Don’t bring it up again’h!” Nina cried. “It’s bringing the memories all back’h!” Nina was flapping her long ears, and the motion was kinda cute. So Nina had owed a debt because of gambling?

“Out of interest, how much was she?” I asked Fujiyan.

“I believe it was a million on the nose. I bought her on the spot!”

“Oh, a reasonable price?” I said that, but I had no idea what the slave market was like.

“Husband’h! Mister Takatsuki’h! Don’t talk like that’h!”

“Nina... You’re never gambling again.”

While Fujiyan and I got carried away, Chris was looking aghast at Nina.

Sasa had taken Lucy up to her room, so neither of them was here presently.

“Hero Makoto, will you be accepting the mafia’s invitation?” Princess Sophia

asked.

“Hmm, well, what’s it say, Fujiyan?”

“I shall read it aloud,” he announced, before doing exactly that.

Dearest Brother,

We have prepared a party and banquet to celebrate our friendship. We would like nothing more than to demonstrate our thanks. Naturally, the strong young lady with you is also welcome.

It will be held in the VIP penthouse on the top floor of the Grand Highland Casino.

P.S. If you show the badge I gave you, then the casino will let you in for free. You can have your fill of the casino too, and if you mention my name, you’ll get some on the house.

—Peter Castor

Silence reigned for a while once Fujiyan was finished reading.

Uh...

“What’ll happen if I go...?” I asked

“You’ll probably get the wining and dining of a lifetime’h,” Nina answered after a moment.

“And you’ll likely be dragged in past the point of no return,” Chris added.

Looking at their expressions, they probably didn’t want me to go.

“My esteemed Tackie, what is this badge the invitation mentioned?”

“Probably...this?”

“May I see?” Fujiyan asked, and I passed it to him. He looked steadily at it, probably using *Appraisal* on it.

“A twin crest. This is definitely the Castor family’s,” he judged.

“Peter is the fifth son of Don Genoa, an important person...”

Fujiyan and the princess both sighed.

“Actually, the letter didn’t say when to show up,” I realized. The invitation had only mentioned the location. Did they forget the date?

“This is the mafia’s way of saying you may come when you please,” Fujiyan explained. “It means that their own preparations are in place and you should make your own.”

Uh, preparations? I didn’t have *any* intention of joining the mafia.

“My biggest concern is the nobles backing them,” Chris said.

“The mafia has connections with nobility?” I asked in shock.

“This is part of how Highland functions...unfortunately’h.”

“The three main mafia families each have a noble family supporting them from the shadows. The Castors...have connections to the Ballantines.”

“Geh!” *For real?! That was Gerald’s family, right? No way.*

“They’re not going to kidnap me if I turn up, are they...?”

“The relationship between the mafia and nobility is fundamentally all business—the Ballantines should just act as influential backup and a source of money...so I doubt they are attempting to get revenge for Lord Gerald’s defeat,” Chris thought aloud.

“You *did* save one of their son’s lives...” Fujiyan added.

Both of them made reassuring points.

“Hero Makoto, you are a representative of Roses, so you need not worry.”

“Princess Sophia...” Her strong voice had managed to reassure me a bit.

“Well, I don’t want to keep them waiting too long, so I guess I’ll go now.”

“Where are you going, Takatsuki?” Sasa asked, returning from tucking Lucy into bed. I grabbed her hand.

“Come with, Sasa,” I said to her.

“What? S-Sure. Where to?”

Sasa hadn’t heard the conversation, but I pulled her in anyway.

Ha ha, you agreed now, so you can't get out of it! Sorry, you're amazing when it comes to a fight, and I'm not letting you go.

"I shall also accompany you," proclaimed Fujiyan. "You will need someone that can negotiate if an argument breaks out."

"Thanks, Fujiyan." And sorry, as well.

"I-If you're going, then I'll come too'h," Nina added.

I was so glad to hear it.

"Then I shall provide several knights from Roses an—"

"No, Lady Sophia, they'll be important if trouble breaks out. I think we should leave the diplomacy to Sir Fujiwara. Look after them, Nina," Chris added.

"Right, leave it to me'h!"

Things had been decided. Sasa, Fujiyan, Nina, and I were headed to a mafia's HQ.

I was so nervous...

The Grand Highland Casino was the largest of its kind in Symphonia. The building emanated a bizarre presence—it looked around ten stories in height, which probably counted as tall in this world, but was far shorter than skyscrapers back in Japan. It even seemed fairly restrained compared to the castle and cathedral. So what stood out about it, you ask?

The whole building shone in gold.

Sasa and I stared up in shock.

"This is one of the places in Symphonia where the most money changes hands," Fujiyan offered.

"You can gamble with anything and everything'h," Nina added, her ears bouncing. *Was that what she was here for?*

"It's built in an odd place though, isn't it?" I asked. The golden building was built into the wall between the sixth and seventh districts, almost punching through it.

"The interior is considered extraterritorial," Fujiyan explained. "While there

are different entrances for humans and demi-humans, all races mingle inside. Discriminatory remarks are likewise forbidden. In a certain light, one could see it as the most egalitarian place within the city.”

“Oh, that’s good.” Apparently, enjoying yourself while gambling was unconnected to race.

“Hey, let’s head inside, Takatsuki, Fujiwara,” Sasa chirped as she ran off. Suddenly, she came to a halt when a bulky black-clad guy caught and stopped her. “Wait, what? No kids? Rude!”

We approached, and I said, “Umm?” before pulling out and showing him the badge I’d been given.

“You what?” the burly guy asked. “Oh, is this kid with you gentlemen?”

“I’m Takatsuki. Peter invited me. Can we go inside?”

“S-Sir Takatsuki! My apologies! Go right on through!” His behavior visibly changed as he opened the heavy doors and showed us in.

“Wow!” we exclaimed in unison.

The carpet was scarlet. There were rows upon rows of slot machines, and I could hear the constant jangle of coins. Dealers were standing in crisp suits at roulette and blackjack tables, and wandering the rest of the floor were...bunny girls...? They were wearing clothes that looked like swimsuits along with garters and fishnet stockings. They were hot! Were their ears real or fake? I glanced at Nina to compare.

“Mister Takatsuki’h?” she asked.

“Ah!” She met my eyes and I hurriedly looked away.

Honestly, Makoto. You can’t look at your friend’s wife like that!

Goddess?! You’re misunderstanding!

Reeeaaally?

No, I was...at least a little.

“The bunny girls here are all rabbit beastears,” Fujiyan informed me with a rueful grin.

“Oh, they look like Nina!” Sasa exclaimed.

“Lady Nina was in such an outfit when we first met,” he reminisced.

“What?” Sasa and I exclaimed in unison. Nina had been a bunny girl... He’d *bought* a bunny girl? *You pig! I’m...so jealous.*

“M-My, I had not mentioned as much before?”

“Not to me,” I told him.

“You perv,” Sasa added to the teasing between us classmates.

Nina was looking at the games on display with sparkling eyes. If we let her roam, she’d probably end up at one of the tables. Sasa grabbed hold of her before she could wander and tugged her along with us.

Another suit-wearing member of staff had approached while we’d been chattering. “This way, Sir Takatsuki. I shall guide you to the VIP room.”

I’d expected him to lead us up a grand staircase or something, but contrary to those expectations, we instead walked into an atrium. There was a place in the room that was surrounded by an iron fence, and a mage was standing there.

We stepped into the fenced area. “Going up,” the mage announced as the floor started to rise.

I-It’s an elevator?! They’ve used Float to lift us!

That’s just what I’d expect from a world of swords and magic... It was kinda slow, though.

“Hey, Fujiyan?” I asked quietly.

“What is it?”

“Who’s important in the Castor family?” It’d be a good idea to know who to look out for.

“Well, of course, there is the head of the family, Sir Genoa Castor,” explained Fujiyan. “However, he is likely to be absent today. Due to his influence in the underworld, he very rarely appears publicly. He is also known as ‘Scarface’ due to, well, the scar on his face.”

“Right, right, who else?” I pressed.

“The next person would be the eldest son, Sir Jack Castor. I would say he is the most likely to be here today. He is a handsome man with blond hair and a large build. Other than him...”

While Fujiyan was explaining more about the power dynamics of the Castor family, we arrived at the top floor. The main casino hall on the first floor had felt pretty luxurious, but this...was on another level. It was decorated in refined blacks, and a huge chandelier glittered above us. There was a group of people wearing black suits underneath it, and one of the men, who seemed a bit more playful than the rest, nimbly came over.

“Hey, Brother!” the man exclaimed. “It’s been too long!”

“Y-Yeah. Thanks for the invitation, Peter.”

He’d come over to us with open arms and his attitude was cheery in the same way that Americans were.

“I’ll introduce you. This is my wonderful family.” He gestured to a lineup of strong-looking guys.

Whoa...it’s a mafia. A real-life mafia...

There were women behind them wearing fancy dresses. Were they like hostesses? The person that drew the most attention was a middle-aged man in the center of the group. He was wearing black clothes alongside expensive-looking accessories. There was a long line of rough skin stretching across his face.

Scarface...? That’s the family’s don. You said he wouldn’t be here, Fujiyan. I glanced at my friend and saw that his expression was frozen.

He hadn’t expected it either, then.

With a smile, Peter showed Sasa and me to our seats. Apparently, the “family” that Peter was talking about didn’t mean his blood-related family, but rather the mafia as a whole. I’d heard that mafias formed strong bonds among their followers and that members wouldn’t allow anyone to insult their comrades.

I’d need to watch my words.

“So, who are those two, Brother?” Peter asked.

“They’re my friends, Fujiyan and Nina.”

“My name is Fujiwara, it is a pleasure to meet you,” Fujiyan greeted.

“G-Good to meet you. I’m Nina, yes’h.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Peter Castor. Come on, take a seat over here.”

The chairs were just as comfortable as the ones in Highland palace. A friendly blond man who was with the burly mafia guys offered us drinks. Was he the eldest son? To be honest, he just seemed like an amiable person.

After a moment, the don spoke. “I’m Genoa Castor. Hero, I hear you aided my idiot son.” His voice was low, but it carried well. A man of culture.

“I-It was nothing much,” I answered. He already knew I was a hero, plus Peter’s dad was super intimidating.

“Pooooops... I said sorry,” Peter complained, scratching at the back of his head.

“Today, we’ve tasked our chefs with crafting dinner from the finest ingredients the capital has to offer,” said the blond from earlier. “We have also gathered the best women, so please enjoy yourselves.” He paused for a moment, then seemed to realize something. “Ah, right, I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Jack Castor.”

So he *was* the eldest son. The rest of the men started giving their own easy introductions.

“I’m the best knife guy in the family.”

“I’m the strongest.”

“If you want to spot a cheat, leave it to me.”

“I’ve had more than a hundred women.”

Their boasts came thick and fast, but I didn’t really mind any of it.

“I’ve killed a dozen men in fights.”

“I can crush a guy’s skull in my bare hands...”

These men were seriously scary. They were definitely the real deal! I hadn't been great with the "bros" back in high school, so how was I supposed to deal with *these* guys?! I looked over at Fujiyan and Nina to see they'd stopped eating as well.

I felt the need to apologize mentally. *Sorry, Sasa, I didn't think I was bringing you somewhere like this...*

I used my *RPG Player* skill to switch perspectives and look her way— "Woow, what's this? Oh! It's great!"

—and she was just enjoying the food like there was no tomorrow. Seriously...she had a stomach of iron, huh?

Jack had seemed to notice that none of us (apart from Sasa) were eating, so he quickly turned to his family. "You lot! You're scaring our guests! Enough!" he yelled at his subordinates.

"Our apologies!" they all cried in unison.

I guess he's not as friendly as he looks...

"Sorry," he said, switching back to his genial expression. "Our men are just excited to meet the rumored hero."

He sure could change tracks at a moment's notice...

"R-Right..." I nodded quietly, stretching my fork out toward the feast before us.

"Takatsuki, look, look, it's foie gras!"

"Sasa, don't talk with your mouth full," I scolded.

The table was loaded with delicacies like caviar along with drinks that you'd never find in the bars we usually visited. Also, every time I emptied my glass, one of the pretty women would instantly refill it.

I glanced at the girls and got some grins in return. Wow, they showed off even more than Lucy. I just couldn't settle down.

"You look all fidgety," Sasa murmured questioningly.

"If anything, you're too calm," I whispered.

“Still, I didn’t know you were a hero, Brother!” said Peter, picking up on the trail of conversation. “In the tunnels, you just called yourself an adventurer. You tricked me!”

“Sorry for hiding it,” I apologized awkwardly, but Peter didn’t seem to mind.

“That’s a hero?” asked one of the men.

“I can’t see it,” remarked another.

“Apparently, he beat the Hero of Lightning, though.”

“Sir Gerald the Wicked Wolf?”

“He’s definitely an otherworlder...”

Judging by the whispers I could hear, heroes were a rare sight, even to the mafia.

“You beat that Gerald kid, then?” the don asked in his deep voice.

Whoops, I need to pay attention, I thought. This situation required a careful touch—if I remembered right, Gerald’s family, the Ballantines, and the Castor mafia were on good terms.

“I-It was just luck,” I sputtered.

“Come on, Brother, you ain’t beating Gerry by chance. Right, Jack?”

“Indeed, he was the country’s strongest warrior until the Hero of Light came around,” Jack confirmed.

That’d just been me losing control of my elemental magic! I wanted to explain what’d actually gone down, but would it be taken poorly?! Plus, Jack and Peter seemed close to him... Almost like family. Were nobles and the mafia just two sides of the same coin?

“We are often consulted when there are those that defy the Ballantine family,” Don Genoa offered quietly.

There was silence as I tensed up. *W-We shouldn’t have come, should we?!*

“But Lord Bartolomeo has not said anything on this occasion,” he continued.

“I-I see.”

Archduke Bartolomeo Ballantine was the father of the Hero of Lightning—Gerald—in addition to being one of the five Sacred Nobles. He'd been glaring at me during the entire meeting yesterday, so I was pretty sure he hated me...

"Pops, the Ballantines are a proud family of knights. I heard that Gerald fought the Hero of Roses in a one-on-one bout. They wouldn't try and get revenge in the shadows like that," Jack said mildly.

"I suppose so," the don answered almost disinterestedly. I just couldn't relax. His scar was intimidating. Couldn't magic have healed it?

As I considered that idea, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"My esteemed Tackie," Fujiyan murmured to me. "Sir Genoa's scar was something he received in a defeat when he was younger, so it is a taboo topic."

"R-Right, I'll be careful. Thanks, Fujiyan." I might have ended up slipping otherwise. That'd been seriously close.

"Hey, that's some scar you've got," Sasa commented.

Wai—?! Sasa! Why?!

The air seemed to freeze.

The beautiful women, the black-suited men, and the two Castor sons all clearly twitched. Fujiyan and Nina had both stiffened, and I could only assume I had as well.

"O-Our apologies'h! Miss Sasaki, apologi—"

"Say, little miss," the don said, interrupting Nina.

Sasa hummed, tilting her head at him.

"What did you say about my scar?"

"It's cool."

"Oh?"

"It's got real 'big boss' vibes!" Sasa grinned among the rest of the stricken faces. Then, as if prompted by that smile, the don grinned as well. It looked terrifying.

“Oh... And what about you, Hero? What do you think?”

He was asking me now! Should I praise it like Sasa? No...I should go for honesty.

“Uh... Personally, I think it’s kinda scary.”

The don’s gaze was intense, made all the more so by the scar in question. “I see... Scary?” Inexplicably, he then burst into laughter. The people around us just watched blankly.

“Did you lot hear that?” the don asked. “The little lady thinks my scar’s cool, and the hero thinks it’s scary. I got this scar when I lost in a fight with another organization,” he explained. “I could’ve had it healed with magic, but I left the wound alone to make sure I never forgot the regret of failure. Since then, I’ve wiped out every person that’s mocked it, and before I knew it, I was the boss of a huge amount of territory...”

“O-Oh... Th-That’s incredible,” Sasa said with a chagrined expression.

Too laaate!

“But recently, no one’s mentioned it... Subordinates, or my children.”

Well, yeah, it’d be terrifying to talk about.

“Hero, why did you call it scary? You could have flattered me the same as the little miss.”

“Because I’m a coward...” I replied honestly. I didn’t know why, but that prompted a happy look from the don.

“A coward despite being a hero... Wonderful. In the end, even we survive due to craven cowardice.”

His actual wording felt like mockery, but that wasn’t at all the impression I got.

“You’re just the sort of people I like to get along with,” he continued, pouring alcohol into my glass. Considering it was the don filling my glass...I couldn’t refuse, could I?

“Please wait, Sir Genoa!” Fujiyan interrupted in a fluster.

“You are the otherworlder Fujiwara, are you not? I have heard of you as well. Apparently, you’re a capable sort.” The don didn’t really seem bothered at the sudden interruption. His sons and the various subordinates all looked nervously at us though.

“It is an honor to hear,” Fujiyan said after a moment. “Pardon my impertinence, but would partaking of the alcohol you offered mean that my friend would be treated as ‘one of the family’?”

“You need not worry about that, Fujiwara. The Castor family requires an oath of blood. Exchanging spirits is not our style,” Jack explained.

“Pardon my rudeness—”

“Though it is sometimes used as an excuse to compel such,” said the don with a grin.

Hey!

“Pops, come on!”

“Don’t worry, Brother, this ain’t that kinda place.”

Both Jack and Peter were hurrying to try and reassure me.

“It’s a joke, just some harmless fun,” the don said before downing his glass of straight spirits. He seemed to be in a good mood.

“Here, here, Boss!” Sasa exclaimed, refilling his glass. I’m not sure whether it was her being quick-witted or just brave.

“The Hero of Roses has been the talk of the town as of late,” noted the don. “It is an honor that you would be afraid of me.”

Wait, I’m being talked about that much?

“What kind of talk, by the way?” I asked.

“The chaos in Horn, of course. While the public story is that Prince Leonardo, the Hero of Ice and Snow, defeated the blight giant, many rumors say that a new otherworld hero was essential to the victory.”

You’ve got an info leak, Princess Sophia.

“I heard that Roses’s heroes get the water goddess Eir’s protection. That’s

gotta earn you some special skills, right?” Jack asked interestedly.

“U-Uh, well...”

All I had was *Water Magic (Low Rank)*. Plus, I wasn’t a believer in the water goddess. They sure seemed to think I was, though. It’d be a bother to deny it, so I didn’t.

“Don’t ask too much,” the don instructed his son. “You’ll put him off.”

So he was a nice guy after all. All right, time to ask about it. “We were actually in the tunnels looking for the Snake Sect. Do you know anything about them?”

“Oh?”

“You were, Brother?”

All of their faces sharpened slightly.

“Allow me to explain,” Fujiyan offered, before launching into an explanation of the events in Roses.

“I see, so Symphonia is their next target,” the don mused with his hand to his chin.

“I haven’t seen them...” Jack began, “but there has been more weed circulating around lately.”

“It’s not just in the ninth district either,” Peter added. “The seventh and eighth are the same. In fact, weed’s going for half the normal price. Maybe there’s a link.”

So there *was* more weed being traded—considering that it was a source of revenue for the Snake Sect, they were likely pulling the strings somewhere.

“Are they selling it to raise extra funds for the war’h?” Nina asked.

“There’s no sign that the Snake Sect is buying weapons though, Lady Nina,” Fujiyan answered. “Currently the most predominant buyers of weapons are beastmen.”

“Tying into the rumors of rebellion,” the don murmured.

“You’ve heard them?” I asked.

“We know all the influentials in the seventh and eighth districts,” Jack said with a conflicted look. “We can investigate.”

“We’ll let you know if we find anything. Though, not for free,” Peter grinned at me.

“The Fujiwara Firm will buy any such information, Sir Peter,” Fujiyan declared.

“Oh! Then I look forward to your patronage.”

After that heavy topic of conversation, there was a period of general chatting, and then the event came to a close.

We all stretched broadly as we left the VIP room and began to head back to the inn.

“That was nerve-racking,” I said, sighing out.

“A little, yes,” Fujiyan replied.

“I’ve got the shakes’h,” Nina added.

Then, Sasa let out a sigh of her own. “The food was great.”

The rest of us exchanged glances. Only Sasa seemed to have a different perspective on that dinner...

“So, what are we doing now?” I asked Fujiyan.

“Personally, I will be investigating matters in the capital. The apparent increase in sales of weed is concerning.”

Nina would probably aid him. I felt bad about foisting that task off on just the two of them, but Sasa and I were rank amateurs at information gathering, so she and I just headed back to the inn.

The next morning, I checked in with both Princess Sophia and Fujiyan, getting updates on all the latest info.

On Princess Sophia’s end, the Temple Knights had eradicated all of the undead from underground, and the apparent ringleaders of the beastman rebellion had been apprehended. There *were* monsters around the city that the Snake Sect could probably control, but the capital had formidable defenses, so

they likely wouldn't be an issue.

The next few days passed peacefully...but then, Sakurai turned up to see us.

Chapter 6: Makoto Takatsuki Meets the Priestess of the Moon

“Good evening, Takatsuki,” Sakurai greeted me.

“Oh, Sakurai?” I answered.

A moment later, Prince Leonardo exclaimed, “The Hero of Light?!”

It was late in the evening—the prince and I had been practicing water magic in my room when Sakurai arrived.

“Sorry to interrupt... But are you free later, Takatsuki?” asked Sakurai.

“Yeah, sure. Do you mind, Prince Leonardo? Sorry to cut our training short.”

“N-Not at all! Please see to the Hero of Light’s request first!”

I figured Sakurai’d just come over to hang out, but his serious expression had probably prompted the prince to infer something else. I waved Sakurai toward a chair and then sank down on my bed, crossing my legs. Prince Leonardo sat next to me.

“So, what’s up?”

“Honestly...I want to discuss the Priestess of the Moon.”

With a tired expression on his face, Sakurai started a halting explanation.

The current moon priestess was descended from the Laphroaig royal family, who once ruled the now-destroyed country of the same name. As the Priestess of the Moon, she was the representative for the Goddess of the Moon, Naya, and the central figure for Naya’s believers.

However, the reputation of moon-aligned followers sank like a rock a thousand years ago when the moon priestess of that era defected to the side of the Great Demon Lord during the war.

It was Abel the Savior that’d eventually revealed the old moon priestess’s allegiance; after the defeat of the Great Demon Lord, the entire nation of

Laphroaig had been destroyed by an alliance of the six nations, the foremost of which was Highland. Everyone in the Laphroaig family had been eradicated during that annihilation.

Everyone...except for one person—Laphroaig's princess, the Priestess of the Moon.

"How come?" I asked Sakurai once he'd explained that history. "Wouldn't it usually be the other way around?" I would've thought that the top people in the country would have been taken straight to the chopping block, while the rest of the citizens would've been spared.

"The princess vanished at the same time as the Great Demon Lord was defeated," Prince Leonardo offered. "She was also known as the Witch of Calamity. Some people claim that she was slain by the savior as well."

Hmm, okay.

"Since then, very few moon priestesses have appeared, and all of them have been descendants of that royal family. Recently, the Soleil Knights captured one of those priestesses." Sakurai's expression looked pained. I didn't know why, though.

"I had heard that she was leading a restoration of Laphroaig and gathering the cambions within its lands," explained Prince Leonardo. "That was apparently the reason the Soleil Knights apprehended her. Sir Sakurai was surely involved."

"Oh, right, Fujiyan mentioned that." I remembered thinking at the time that Sakurai didn't have it easy.

"But..." Sakurai hesitated. "The people actually living in Laphroaig were harmless. They were living in peace."

"What?"

"The Soleil Knights' purpose in doing so was demonstrative—we wanted to encourage and give hope to the people who fear the Great Demon Lord... But, in reality, our actions just oppressed cambions who weren't hurting anyone..."

"Sakurai..."

It...was a depressing topic. Sakurai must have been used.

“I was chosen for the exercise because of my *Debuff Immunity* skill. The priestess has—on top of her fate magic—considerable skill in dark magic and curses.” His voice was nowhere near as bright as normal. “She cussed me out and asked what I found enjoyable about hurting weak people. Especially hurting those who were living peacefully.”

The prince and I remained silent. It wasn’t a pleasant story to hear.

“She’s recently escaped, but she hasn’t left the city. I really shouldn’t...but I want to help her escape...”

I exchanged a glance with Prince Leonardo at the admission.

The prince spoke first and asked Sakurai, “What do you want to do?”

“And what about your subordinates?” I added. “Will the Soleil Knights help you?”

Sakurai gave a long pause.

“My plan...goes against the decisions of Highland’s superiors. My motivation is my own selfishness.”

Right, so his fellow knights certainly wouldn’t offer aid.

“So, do you know where she is?” I inquired.

“No...” he answered apologetically. “I’m not great at gathering information like that.”

This was a tricky one. Finding people would be Fujiyan’s wheelhouse since he had his merchant network. He was already really busy though, so I didn’t want to ask that of him. The prince might be able to use his status, but he was probably in the same boat. We were stuck.

The graveyards, Noah said in my mind.

Noah?

Search the city’s graveyards, she told me explicitly.

What brought this on?

Don’t you feel sorry for her? She doesn’t deserve that, does she?

Something sounds fishy... Do you have an ulterior motive there?

Rude! I don't!

It certainly was rude. Guess I shouldn't doubt my goddess. Thank you, Noah.

"A graveyard, Sakurai. That's where she is."

The other two looked at me with wide eyes and both sputtered out a questioning noise.

But in the end, we three heroes headed off for the graveyards.

There were two main types of cemeteries in Symphonia.

The first were Holy Resting Grounds, where royals, clergy, and other nobility were interred. They were guarded around-the-clock by the Temple Knights to stop any grave robbing.

As for the second type...

"I think she'll be hiding here," Sakurai told us. He'd explained the segregation of the graveyards, and after, had guided us to a cemetery that was not restricted to the higher echelons of society. Here, in the public cemetery, commoners of the fourth through ninth districts could be buried. Humans, beastmen, and other demi-humans were all included, and the cemetery had rows of graves within it.

It was also late at night, so our presence wouldn't draw attention.

Sakurai and Prince Leonardo were both wearing plain armor. As for me? Well, my normal clothes were plain anyway, so I hadn't needed to change. Wooo.

"But the Temple Knights and priests should patrol this cemetery as well," Prince Leonardo interjected. "After all, corpses are used to create the undead."

That was a real "otherworld problem" if I'd ever heard one. Cemeteries in this world could become infested by the undead, so even public ones needed to be patrolled.

"I can't see any. No humans at least," I offered quietly.

"Yeah, so undead are just roaming the place," Sakurai added.

Skeletons and zombies were just shuffling between the graves like they owned the place. We used *Stealth* to gradually make our way through. I hadn't expected Sakurai to have that skill since he was so strong—I figured he'd have no need to hide from monsters.

There were enough trees around the graveyard that it was like walking through a forest, plus, there was a thick mist that made visibility awful. The monsters probably wouldn't spot us. Though, some of them were standing around, almost like lookouts in set locations. This amount of undead in one place surely wasn't a natural occurrence.

"Think we've got the place?" I asked.

"She is a necromancer," said Sakurai, "so I think we do."

"The lack of Temple Knights and priests might also be due to her puppetry. It would certainly explain their absence," the prince reasoned.

So the moon priestess was probably here after all. We'd found a woman wanted throughout Highland's capital in no time flat... That's my goddess.

You've got that right, she replied with a giggle.

Thank you, Noah. Time to confirm things.

I turned to Prince Leonardo. "I know I invited you, but are you sure you should've come?" He didn't have *Stealth*, so he was holding my sleeve. It was pretty adorable; he was like a puppy.

"I will be fine. I am a hero after all." His tone was firm, but his voice shook. He was letting out soft *eeps* and jumping every time we saw a zombie. Honestly, I was worried—Princess Sophia was definitely going to have something to say to me about it.

"Before we see her, there's something I need to warn you two about," Sakurai said seriously. "She can use fate magic to see the future. It isn't all-powerful, but there's a distinct possibility that she may know we're coming. She also has high-level *Puppetry* and *Charm* skills. If she touches us, even I won't be able to resist her bidding."

"But you're the Hero of Light?!" Prince Leonardo exclaimed in shock.

“Yeah. Fortunately, my fellow Soleil Knights helped me, but people without resistance against mental effects can get ensnared by just hearing her voice or meeting her eyes.”



"I guess there's not much we can do about that." I couldn't help my astonishment, and I was impressed they'd caught her at all. "I've got *Calm Mind*, so I'll be fine. Prince Leonardo, did you learn *Serenity*?"

"I-I did, just like you said."

In which case, a simple *Charm* shouldn't affect him.

"I'll persuade her," Sakurai said. "She's probably guarded by some high-level undead under the control of her *Necromancy*, so I want you to keep those monsters in check."

"Got it." I confirmed.

"V-Very well." Despite his apparent fear, the prince still managed to answer.

"Now, this is the most important thing," Sakurai said after a moment, his voice growing even more serious.

There was more?

"You can't attack her."

"What?" I asked. *Why?*

"Her curse," Prince Leonardo said in apparent understanding.

"And that means we can't attack her?" I was still confused.

"Those that attack her will suffer from a *Curse of Vengeance*. If she is slain, her killer will be cursed with death,"

"The *Curse of Vengeance* doesn't stop with just the killer," clarified Prince Leonardo. "It takes out everyone around them. There are theories that it can exterminate an entire town."

"Scary..."

Darkness and death were moon-attributed, so they were under Naya's domain. The moon priestess would have Naya's blessings... *Hmm, that'd be pretty dangerous indeed*, I thought. I quickly ratcheted up *Calm Mind*.

Right, there was also something I needed to say before we confronted her.

"Sakurai, I need to ask something as well."

“Yeah, what?”

I glanced at the prince clutching my sleeve.

“Prince Leonardo and I were just here to help you take out some undead we discovered in a cemetery. We didn’t have anything to do with the Priestess of the Moon’s escape. That’s the deal, okay?”

“Right...” Sakurai trailed off. “I guess I’ve put you two heroes on thin ice with this plan.”

He offered an apologetic smile. I wasn’t blaming him or anything, though—if he was as relaxed as he usually was then he would’ve noticed that about my attitude. The whole “reincarnation of the savior” thing coupled with his position as leader of the Soleil Knights must have been weighing on him.

“All right, don’t worry about it,” he said.

“Thanks, you’re a lifesaver,” I told him. “Are you going to manage to win her over, though? I don’t know what kind of person she is.”

“Yeah...I think so. I visited her every day while she was imprisoned, and she didn’t seem unimpressed with me. But, it *was* me that caught her, so she might be angry...”

“Come on!” I cried out. Was this even going to work? Still, the whole scenario was right out of a story—Sakurai visited an imprisoned princess every day. Plus, he was the main character there.

“I guess asking if you know how to deal with girls is pretty rude,” I said. “We’ll leave it to you.”

“It’s not like I’m *that* used to—”

“You’re not?” I interjected. “You were going out with the student teacher in junior high. If you’re not used to dealing with girls, who is?”

Come on, Sakurai, apologize to all the virgins... Or at least me!

“Th-That was a long time ago! She was crying and I didn’t know what to— Hang on, how do you know about that?!”

“Sasa told me,” I replied. “Hell, all the girls knew.”

“Urk, the gossip network is scary...”

“U-Uh, shouldn’t we be quiet?” Prince Leonardo timidly interrupted as Sakurai and I chattered. Whoops, that was rude... The last half of our conversation had nothing to do with him.

“Still, you two certainly seem to be on good terms,” he added with a jealous look.

Are we? Well, I guess we are old friends.

“Let’s head in, then,” Sakurai declared.

The prince and I nodded quietly.

Bathed in the moonlight, the girl looked like a beautiful ghost.

That was the first description I thought of when I saw her from a distance.

She had dark, glossy hair and was wearing an elegant dress. Her listless face had the symmetry of a doll’s. She was sitting on a rock at the edge of a small pond, and suits of armor surrounded her. There were probably around twenty of them.

We used *Stealth* to slink behind the trees and weigh up our options.

“Is that her?” I asked Sakurai quietly.

“Yeah, definitely.” A note of relief had entered his voice.

“So that’s the priestess of the moon goddess that can charm any living thing...” Prince Leonardo murmured curiously.

“What was that?” I asked.

“She’s considered to be the most beautiful woman in the world, after the goddesses,” he explained.

“Oh...”

The most beautiful but for the goddesses, huh? Well, the ethereal scene before us was definitely because of her beauty.

Suddenly, she spoke.

“You can come out, Ryouzuke.”

In unison, we gasped—we’d been found out. Sakurai glanced at me, and I wordlessly understood that he wanted me as hidden backup. I gave him an affirmative gesture.

“Hey, Furiae,” he answered, appearing from the shadows of the tree. His voice was as cheery as when he used to talk to girls from our class.

“Why are you here?”

By contrast, *her* voice was chilly.

“To help you.”

“Leave me alone. It’s better that way.”

Hmm, I can’t tell how she feels from her tone.

“The gates all have a Temple Knight with *Scout* on guard duty,” Sakurai pointed out. “You’re not going to be able to escape on your own, are you?”

“I will be fine. After all, there will be uproar within the town before long, and I’ll take advantage of it.”

“The beastman rebellion?” Sakurai asked after a pause. “The ringleaders have been captured, so it won’t happen.”

“Oh... I see. That’s good.” Her voice was calm, like she’d seen all this coming. “There are more monsters around the city walls. It’s likely the Snake Sect’s doing. Did you know about that?”

“We’ve made preparations for that as well. The Soleil Knights and the Four Cardinal Knights have bolstered the forces at the gates. The monsters won’t make it into the city.”

She chuckled teasingly.

“Won’t they?”

He didn’t seem to be convincing her. Did she even need help?

“Then...do you have connections with the Snake Sect?” he asked.

There was a long pause.

“Don’t be a fool. I loathe them.”

So she said, at least. They probably weren’t allies.

“I’ve had enough,” she said. “Will you leave? I don’t need your help.”

As she spoke, the suits of armor that had been standing at attention around her drew their swords. Sakurai didn’t brandish his own weapon though.

Come on, dude, what gives?

“You don’t need my help?” he pressed.

“You’ve become irritating. Leave me alone.” Her voice had started to sound angry. When she lifted her hand toward the moon, the twenty knights all advanced on Sakurai.

She was just going to attack out of nowhere?!

“Sakurai!” Leonardo and I called in unison, jumping out.

“Oh? Well, these are new faces. Different from the spellsword that’s always with you.”

Did she mean Yokoyama? While that thought was running through my mind, the knights had surrounded Sakurai.

He was handling them with ease, but...

Is he slower?

“Makoto, the Hero of Light isn’t as strong when he’s not under the sun!” the prince cried.

Oh! Sakurai *did* say something about that! I took a good look at the knights she was commanding—they all had skulls for faces, so they were definitely undead knights, and they were far faster and stronger than skeletons or zombies. These monsters must be her real fighting force.

“Sorry about this, Prince Leonardo.”

“Makoto?”

I grabbed hold of his hand.

Synchro.

He let out a gasp, but I'd apologize properly later.

"Water Magic: Water Dragon!"

I let loose the ultra rank spell, blasting several of the undead knights away.

"So you're a mage despite that dagger," said the moon priestess, still at ease.

Sakurai continued fighting the undead knights. It was probably because of the lack of sunlight, but he didn't have the strength he'd possessed during our battle with the blight dragons. Regardless, it didn't look like he'd lose against these undead. I mean, he was fighting bare-handed.

No, the greater concern was that the priestess—Furiae—still had that damned composure on her face. She smiled, slowly approaching us.

"M-Makoto..." warbled Prince Leonardo.

"Don't forget your *Serenity* skill," I instructed.

His grip on my hand tightened as I spoke. What was he, a girl? I readied my dagger to protect him, but I couldn't attack her, so I didn't know what I was actually going to do.

"It's a good thing that tonight's a full moon," she commented with a gentle smile. "Naya's blessing is at its strongest."

Suddenly her eyes glowed gold. *"Please, would you listen?"*

Was that *Charm*? My *Calm Mind* prevented it from affecting me. Plus, Prince Leonardo had learned *Serenity*. Too bad, priestess. I was relieved at that and—"Watch out!" Sakurai leaped into our space from out of nowhere.

What'd you do that for?!

"Uh?"

But when I looked toward him, I saw Prince Leonardo's sword sticking out of him.

◇ Furiae's Perspective ◇

As long as I've been aware, I've been alone. I don't know what my parents look like, or if I have siblings. I have no friends, no one to rely on. The only looks I get...are ones of revulsion and fear.

I was born and raised in the ruined country of Laphroaig. A thousand years ago, the Priestess of the Moon—also known as the Witch of Calamity—betrayed humanity to the demons. Apparently, if she touched, spoke, or met someone’s gaze, she could control them as she wished. The only one she could not possess was the ancient Great Demon Lord. The legend goes that she became his lover.

She became the most despised person in history. And I...am her reincarnation.

I was brought up—and venerated—in the ruins of my country by people who secretly followed Naya, the Goddess of the Moon.

Don’t make me laugh. That bitch made my life hell. I just wanted a peaceful life.

Memories of my capture by Highland flooded my mind.

“There is no other choice,” said Pope Roma with a fixed smile.

“Though it is...less than pleasant for you,” added the Priestess of the Sun, a woman called Noelle.

Behind them stood the hero that had caught me. Where did he get off, looking so sad? Hypocrite. He and his knights had trampled through my quiet life in Laphroaig. My hands and feet were now bound in thick shackles and connected by a hefty chain.

I was imprisoned under the cathedral. Here, the sun goddess’s power made my own magic essentially unusable. I could not escape, but my *curse* meant that they couldn’t kill me. I was being kept alive like some sort of cattle. No, cattle had a purpose—I was even lower...

“Sorry...” the hero apologized. For some reason, he’d come to visit me every day.

“If you want to atone, how about getting me out of here?”

“I...can’t do that...”

He made me sick, putting on a kind face. If he couldn’t help me, he could just

disappear.

“Furiae... Are you leading the cambions? Or do you have connections with the Snake Sect?”

“I’m not, and, if anything, I hate them.”

Cambions were the reason the world despised me. As the story went, that was the Witch of Calamity’s fault. She had pushed a policy of appeasement in Laphroaig—when the Great Demon Lord had ruled the world, only Laphroaig had been spared his tyranny. That was due to the push for unions between demons and humans, which led to many children being born with mixed heritage. Gradually, there would’ve been more and more cambions, which would’ve nullified the reason for war between races... Well, that had been the plan, apparently.

It had ended in failure.

After all, those unions had been forced with *Charm* rather than consensual feelings, so a policy like that was never going to succeed. It only resulted in the birth of a nomadic race, of tens of thousands of cambions...all at the behest of that era’s moon priestess.

Her plan didn’t have anything to do with *me* though! The people leading cambions into darkness were the Snake Sect, and they were aiming for the prosperity of cambion-kind. I had nothing to do with those snakes, even though the world at large looked at me with the same lens.

Even so, the Hero of Light still kept coming to visit, and gradually, I grew to not dislike seeing his face.

“Don’t come back again...” I said to him, one time. He’d brought me something this time, and had insisted on me accepting it.

“Don’t worry about it,” he answered. “I picked these up at a store. They’re rare fruits.”

“They could do with being sweeter.”

“Got it! I’ll bring something else, next time!”

And so, the day after, he did just that. How strange...

“Come with me!” the first prince of Highland demanded one day. “I know you’re connected to the Snake Sect!”

He moved me somewhere else. I had nothing to do with the Snake Sect, but he wouldn’t believe me. Still, it was good luck that he’d moved me away from the powerful barrier around the cathedral. His pointless questions were a pain, but I saw my chance—I captivated a nearby knight’s attention and controlled them.

I made my escape, hiding in the tunnels beneath Symphonia, and waited for my chance to flee from the city.

The tunnels were huge. I used *Necromancy* to create undead at every exit I found, searching for a way out. I spent several days doing this, but one day, I found them all defeated.

It had happened out of nowhere—every single one of my scouts had been defeated. I assumed that the Temple Knights wiped them out en masse.

It didn’t matter.

After all, I’d discovered that I couldn’t leave the city. Every exit was guarded by a team of Temple Knights, so there was no way I’d escape.

I’ll need some new troops...

I wandered into a public graveyard. So far, it’d been my stronghold, a place with vast arrays of material for summoning the undead, and a veritable treasure trove of corpses...

I honestly didn’t want to create any undead, though. By night, I controlled them, and by day, I gathered funds by playing the part of a fortune-teller in the sixth district.

My daytime activities soon netted me some interesting information:

There was a plot for the beastmen to revolt. At first, I’d been confused as to why but then I considered the circumstances. The Soleil Knights were all in Symphonia right now, along with other knights from all over the country. They

were here for the Hero of Light's induction as the leader of the Soleil Knights.

But, I'd figured out the real plot.

The damned Snake Sect were the ones pulling the strings of the uprising. They were from Laphroaig, just the same as me... They supported a heretical church, and they wanted to cause a riot.

I could use that cover to escape. And, I wouldn't stop the rebellion or riots. Honestly, I had no obligation to do so, and, if anything, I hoped that the pope and priestess who'd scorned me would get caught up in the revolt and die.

I could use fate magic to see the future.

However, that future was not absolute—I could only see “big events,” not specifics. If I'd been able to predict everything, then the Soleil Knights would never have caught me. Still, both the beastman rebellion and the chaotic plot of the Snake Sect were classed as “big,” so I could foresee exactly what day those events would happen. They would occur just a few days in the future... I figured that I could escape then, so I just hid out in the cemetery for a while. I'd charmed all the Temple Knights patrolling the area, and I had my undead patrolling instead. Everything should have been fine.

However, today was different.

Someone's here.

Actually, I knew who it was.

Him.

The lines of causality were only visible to those that could use fate magic, and by counting all those lines, I could infer how important a person was, along with their influence. Most people had around ten causality lines at most.

A member of royalty would have hundreds of lines. The Hero of Light...had thousands. He had so much influence I could believe he really was Abel the Savior's reincarnation.

And now, I knew that he was near me.

“You can come out, Ryousuke,” I called to him. It had been a while.

“Hey, Furiae,” he answered. His voice was too cheery for the atmosphere of graves around us. He looked just the same as every time I’d seen him during my imprisonment.

Actually, he might look more tired. Is he all right?

“Why are you here?”

My assumption was right—he was usually softhearted, and he was naively hoping to help me.

It would be one thing if he were alone, but he’d brought a friend. It was probably the spellword he was usually with...or not. There were two of them, and I didn’t know their faces. Were they his subordinates? One seemed fairly strong, if young. The other was...super weak? What a strange combination.

I’d toss the undead knights their way and buy some time to allow me to escape. Considering the Hero of Light’s personality, he wouldn’t be fighting seriously.

Oh well. I’d just use *Charm* on the two people he’d brought along.

“What?”

Ryousuke?! Why would you take the hit instead?!

“Just forget it!” I yelled in confusion, running away.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

“Sakurai!”

Through my altered perspective from *RPG Player*, I noticed Prince Leonardo’s empty eyes, but at just that moment, Sakurai leaped between us.

His blood spurted in the moonlight.

Damn, his Serenity skill wasn’t enough!

Prince Leonardo’s sword had sliced through Sakurai’s shoulder, and then his small body had fallen to the ground.

“Wh-What in the world...?” The prince was back to his senses now. It seemed that he’d only been controlled for a moment.

“What are you doing?!” the priestess shrieked in shock.

Uh...that was your fault though?

“S-Stop them!” she ordered the various undead before running away.

“Sakurai, you good?!”

“Sak— Hero!” cried Prince Leonardo. “What have I—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sakurai interrupted. “Sorry, Takatsuki...*Charm* doesn’t work on you, so can you chase her? I’ll be right behind you. Make sure she doesn’t touch you though!” As he spoke, he used a recovery item to heal up.

Great, his wound wasn’t too bad, then.

“As long as you’re okay...” I replied doubtfully. “What happens if she touches me?”

“When she did it to me, I couldn’t resist her *Charm*, even in the sunlight. If she can touch it, there’s nothing in this world she can’t charm!”

“Got it.”

I couldn’t hurt her, and I couldn’t even touch her. She sure was a piece of work. Still, I couldn’t just leave her either.

It’s my fault he got hurt...

My *RPG Player* skill would’ve normally let me block the prince’s attack, but I’d let my guard down because Sakurai was around. I couldn’t slip like that again. So I left the undead to the other two and chased after the priestess as she ran through the graves.

She’s fast!

I wasn’t catching up at all. If anything, she was losing me.

Well, she is a priestess.

They were on par with heroes in this world, and they had exceptionally high stats, whereas mine were even lower than average.

I’d probably even lose if I tried to arm-wrestle Princess Sophia...probably.

Damn it! I was supposed to be a hero!

Well, if I can't win fair and square, I'll just have to stack the deck.

Water Magic: Ice Floor.

The ground just under her feet froze solid. She seemed like she was about to fall, but then managed to regain her footing.

Not bad.

Now she'd changed direction. Not going to happen.

"Water Magic: Ice Floor, Ice Floor, Ice Floor."

I froze the ground wherever she tried to place her feet.

With an angry look in her eyes, she glanced back at me. Was she giving up?

Apparently not. She lifted her hand to the moon and chanted, *"I call you from the gate of death, return and serve me..."*

Her voice sounded like singing. It was beautiful, but it prompted ugly zombies to drag themselves up from the ground. So this was *Necromancy*.

"You can deal with these!" she yelled as they circled me.

She was going to use the distraction to escape.

"Elementals," I called.

Water Magic: Ice World.

Everything—the zombies, the ground, and even the trees—froze. I'd kept my magic from affecting the area around her, though. That way, her curse shouldn't counter it.

"You're a clever mage," she said after a moment.

"Sorry, but you annoyed me by hurting a friend of mine," I replied.

I'd learned from my fight with Gerald, so I kept *Calm Mind* at fifty percent, letting just *some* anger slip toward the elementals.

"Just wait there until Sakurai gets here, would you?"

She was silent.

I couldn't attack her directly, but I could indirectly stop her from running by

freezing the ground. The entire area was blanketed in frost.

“Troublesome mage,” she spat, glaring at me. If looks could kill, I’d have been dead on the spot. Her eyes glowed gold. She was trying to use *Charm* again? That wouldn’t work on me, though.

Wait, it’s not just her eyes... Her whole body’s glowing...

There was a crunch as she kicked off the floor, cracking the ice.

Gah! She’s coming for me?! Her body’s covered in Aura as well.

I readied my dagger. She was pretty fast.

But I can’t attack her! I reminded myself, frantically lowering my dagger as I remembered Sakurai explaining her curse.

I wasn’t sure what to do. Damn it! This was the downside of turning down *Calm Mind*—I couldn’t pick the best choice as quickly.

While my mind was spinning, she grabbed my arm.

She’s touching me now!

I hurriedly set *Calm Mind* as high as it would go. Attacking her wasn’t a possibility since the curse would counter me. I needed to shake her off with the least movement possible.

But before I could even attempt it, she started to speak.

“Obey me,” her voice chimed, obsidian eyes boring into mine. I remembered that not even the Hero of Light could resist her if she was in physical contact with him.

I might be too late. Although...she had beauty only surpassed by the goddesses? Yeah, she was beautiful, only slightly less so than Noah...

“Hand over that dagger,” she ordered me.

She wanted Noah’s dagger? Well...

“Sorry, I can’t do that,” I told her. It was my only weapon, and a gift from Noah as well. I couldn’t hand it over.

“Wha?” Her mouth dropped open.

“I-I said obey me!” she demanded, tightening her grip.

“Ehh, it doesn’t matter how many times you say it,” I answered.

“Why can you still talk?! That goddess said my *Charm* would work on everything alive!”

“I don’t know what to tell you. Besides, maybe you shouldn’t be so casual about her?”

“It’s her fault my life is so awful!” raged Furiae. “All because she made me her priestess! Why should I be respectful?!”

That was a strange thing to hear... Did she not get along with her goddess?

“H-Hey, look me in the eyes,” she said tearfully.

That was pretty blatant.

“But...I already am...?” I looked steadily into her wide, slightly purple eyes.

Suddenly, she grabbed hold of the back of my head and brought her forehead almost against mine.

“Th-There’s no way it won’t work if we’re this close...”

Her breath smelled slightly sweet as she spoke. She was way too close, but Noah’s usual sexual harassment had kinda desensitized me to it.

Had Noah been planning for this the whole time?! That’s my goddess!

W-Well, you know!

I could see her puffing her chest out with a smug look. Yeah, guess not...

H-Hey! It’s a goddess’s job to tempt their disciples!

That’s supposed to be a job? Whatever, Noah’s teasing had gotten me used to her beauty, and she *was* the most beautiful person I’d ever seen.

R-Right? See, it’s all thanks to me! she insisted with an audible wink.

Sure, let’s go with that.

I turned my attention back to the moon priestess. “Sakurai will be here soon, Furiae. Just wait for a bit longer.”

I moved to grab her and keep her from running away. Her *Charm* wasn't going to work on me.

"N-No way..." She collapsed to the ground, and her face morphed from an expression of utter surety to something teary. "Why?! I only *have* my magic! I've come this far on my own with moon magic! If I can't even have that, I shouldn't even be alive!" She shook her hair out in fury, grabbing at my arm even tighter.

O-Ow! She's strong!

"C-Calm down—"

"How can I?! I don't have anyone I can count on! No parents, no brothers, no friends! I've been treated like a leper for as long as I can remember because I'm *her* priestess. They all feared and hated me... The slimeball men look at me with lust, and the women hate me even more because of it... My moon magic let me escape danger—I could control the people that attacked me and get away. I've spent my whole life running, and for what?! It's because I'm *her* priestess! I...I just wanted a quiet life..."

I couldn't answer.

This girl had issues!

What should I do? Sakurai! Hurry up!

"Please...kill me..." She'd been so worked up, but now her voice was one of utter despair.

What the hell does she mean? Is she sick?

Will you kill the Priestess of the Moon, Furiae?

Yes

No

The hell kinda choice was that?! There wasn't any question there. "No," obviously. Plus, her curse would kill me as well if I did her in. More importantly, though, there was no way I could slay a girl who'd suffered as she had...

Furiae squeaked. She'd looked teary before, but now, she was cringing away in terror. Uh? Could she see the options presented by *RPG Player*? That...wasn't good.

Immediately, I selected "No," and she gasped again, seeming incredibly surprised.

I...was never going to pick "Yes." Yet, she was still looking fearfully at me. *Why?*

"Takatsuki!"

"Makoto!"

Oh, the others are here.

"You're late, Sakurai," I told him. Finally, I wasn't stuck alone with her.

"Wh-What are you doing?!" Sakurai demanded.

"U-Um, Makoto..." stammered the prince. "You're holding onto her...?"

I'd been told not to let her touch me, but here I was, clinging to her arm. Yup, I suppose that was definitely worth the comment.

"I guess charm magic just doesn't work on me," I answered.

"Impossible! She has the Witch of Calamity's *Charm* skill—it's legendary!" Prince Leonardo wasn't usually one to refute someone so plainly. *Guess it is pretty strange then...* It was kinda late for me to realize, but I was pretty sure that my total resistance to *Charm* was due to *Calm Mind*.

"Not like I'd expect any different from you..." Sakurai marveled. Then, he switched gears. "Thank you for chasing her."

"You're welcome. Your wound all good?"

"More or less." He looked to be in some pain, but he slowly came over to us.

"Furiae, why did you run aw—"

"Sorry...about earlier," she interrupted. "I just meant to surprise you."

"I know. You'd have done worse if you were serious."

"Hmph."

Sakurai had a slightly awkward look, but his smile was still bright, while Furiae was pouting with reddened cheeks.

Uh? When'd this turn into a rom-com? Mind doing this when I'm not here?

"What happens now?" she asked.

"I'll ask Noelle for help."

Furiae quickly shot down the suggestion. "Don't even think about it. She's the Priestess of the Sun...she'll never let me go."

"Hear me out—once I'm a leader of the Soleil Knights, I'll have duties in all the major cities. I can smuggle you out and help you escape."

"And what should I do until then?" she countered.

"Well..."

"So, you've got no plan. I'll escape on my own."

"No. You could get caught again. I'll hel—"

"You're supposed to be the reincarnation of the savior, right?" she asked.

"Surely, it'd be better if you weren't around a cursed priestess."

There was silence for a while. It kinda sounded like a breakup, to be honest. Did they even remember that I was here?

"Shall we head back?" I asked the prince quietly.

"But she can escape if you're not here."

"Aww." This is so annoying, though!

"Hey, Sakurai," I offered at a more normal volume. "If you want, I can look after her for a few days. I'm pretty sure Fujiyan can find us somewhere to hide her." Even if I *hadn't* wanted to ask Fujiyan for more help...

"Takatsuki...I'm sorry."

"Are you sure?" Prince Leonardo asked.

Sakurai was looking at me apologetically, while the prince just seemed worried. As for Furiae...she was peering at me like I was some bizarre creature.

Yeah, I'm just causing more and more trouble for myself, aren't I?

When we got back to our inn in the third district, everything was dead silent.

Lucy, Sasa, Princess Sophia, Fujiyan, Nina, and Chris were all staring at me wordlessly. *Come on, guys, don't look at me like that!* Sakurai had gone back to the castle for now. After all, he stuck out like a sore thumb here. The prince was hiding behind me. His sister hadn't been pleased when she'd heard about us going to a graveyard at night. I was honestly as scared of her rebuke as Prince Leonardo was.

And, the cause of all of it—Furiae, the Priestess of the Moon—was refusing to meet anyone's eyes.

Couldn't she be a bit more cooperative? She *was* tied up, so she couldn't run away. Tying up a beautiful woman like her felt unavoidably sinful...

"Hero Makoto... Of all people, why have you brought the Priestess of the Moon with you?" Princess Sophia asked, head cradled in her hands.

"Sakurai asked me to."

"I will need to speak to Princess Noelle an—"

"I'd...rather you didn't," I interrupted.

"Roses and Highland are allies," she said after a pause. "Sheltering this priestess is an act of treachery."

Her words were coldly logical. Well, we're done for—I hadn't expected Princess Sophia to be here. Considering that Prince Leonardo had been late coming back, I should've expected that she might come here to check on him...

I glanced at the Priestess of the Moon, apologetic and slightly at a loss.

Suddenly, she opened her mouth as if she'd had an idea. "The beastmen's rebellion will begin soon." The first words out of her mouth had to do with the uprising. All of us exchanged glances.

"Lady Furiae," Fujiyan began. "The ringleaders have all been captured. There will be no rebellion."

"That's right'h! We've gone through that area of the city and the rumors

about it are abating'h!"

"Oh? Well then, you don't need to believe me," Furiae answered with a meaningful smile.

What did she mean?

"Hey, you're that fortune-teller from the sixth district, right?" Sasa asked, jumping into the conversation.

"That's right! So you use fate magic?" Lucy added.

"You two have met her before?" I asked.

Apparently, the three had met while Furiae was doing her day job of fortune-telling in the sixth district. What a coincidence... Actually it was more like she'd gone after people that appeared to have money.

"So...using your fate magic, you can see a future where the rebellion takes place?" Princess Sophia asked.

The other priestess's only response was a smile.

"Give me an answer, Priestess of the Moon," Princess Sophia ordered.

"When will it happen?" I asked.

Furiae's smile vanished and she looked seriously at me.

"Tomorrow."

T-Tomorrow?!

"That...is no lie," Fujiyan judged hesitantly.

Chris and Nina both exclaimed in shock and whipped around to look at him. So Fujiyan's *Mind Reading* skill had verified her words. For real...?

"I find that hard to believe..." the princess said.

"Yeah, what about you, Aya?" Lucy asked.

"Nope, I don't buy it."

The three of them didn't know about Fujiyan's skill, so they didn't believe the moon priestess.

“I’ll explain things to you three later,” I said. “Can we just carry on under the assumption that she’s right?”

They all nodded silently at my serious request.

“Incidentally, it isn’t the rebellion itself that will happen tomorrow,” Furiae added happily.

“What else could it be?” I pressed.

“A group of monsters will attack the capital.”

I remembered that Princess Noelle had brought up that possibility during the meeting. “The Soleil Knights and the Four Cardinal Knights are protecting the gates,” I explained. “A group of monsters—”

“There are both land and water beasts,” Furiae interrupted. “Protection from the direction of the ocean is weaker.”

“Is she right, Fujiyan?” I asked my friend.

“Well...the monsters have indeed been gathering in the forests near Symphonia, so there has been no suggestion of an attack from the water. The protection spells on the coastline will be the same as normal...”

“An unexpected revolt from the beastmen coupled with a larger than expected attack from monsters will plunge Symphonia into uproar, the most it’s ever experienced,” Furiae explained, seemingly unconcerned. “I had planned to escape during this turmoil, though I never expected to be captured beforehand.”

“That... That should not...” Princess Sophia didn’t look like she believed Furiae yet. I glanced over at Fujiyan and he nodded—the moon priestess hadn’t lied.

“Princess Sophia, you may not believe it, but—”

“No, I do not believe her words,” she interjected. “I do, however, believe *you*. Hero Makoto, you must have some proof of it.” She was putting her faith in me. That trust felt strong, and honestly, it made me feel awkward.

I turned to face the Priestess of the Moon.

“Furiae, we want to stop the rebellion and minimize casualties from the

monsters as much as possible. You want to escape this country. Both of our desires are clear, so let's negotiate."

The priestess looked like she'd been waiting for that. It felt like she was leading me by the nose.

"Negotiations... Very well. I have conditions, though," she replied, looking straight at me and smiling.

Chapter 7: Makoto Takatsuki Guards the Capital

The inauguration was an event held to confirm the Hero of Light as one of the leaders of the Soleil Knights, a title that Sakurai had earned after defeating the blight dragons. Its other purpose was to inform other countries that Highland had the allegiance of Abel the Savior's reincarnation. Coincidentally, the ceremony would also announce the appointment of a new State-Authorized Hero in the small land of Roses. *So I'm coincidental then? I see.*

I could hear the knights chatting from where I was sitting.

"Shame the weather couldn't have been nicer for the event," one knight complained.

"We could've held it on a different day, yeah. I hate wearing wet armor."

"Surely the Grandsage could've changed the weather."

"She would never, though. She follows her own whims too much."

"You're right, there..."

We were gathered in the plaza in front of Highland Castle. It was normally used as a garden, but there were tens of thousands of soldiers standing at attention there instead. The skies were cloudy, and rain was drizzling down on us. A clear day would've definitely been more picturesque, but the tens of thousands of soldiers were still an intimidating sight. I was honestly shocked that this was just a *part* of Highland's troops.

"Will they really rebel against this?" I wondered to myself.

"Hey, Takatsuki?"

"Makoto, it *will* happen, right?"

Sasa and Lucy needled me when they heard my whisper. Whoops, better keep my mouth shut.

Our group was in the visitor's seats reserved for nobles. We were being treated as more-or-less some of the central figures here. Princess Sophia and

Prince Leonardo were situated a little ways away since they were royalty. I was kinda worried about their safety. Still, they had that bodyguard of theirs, so they'd probably be fine.

Fujiyan and the others were evacuating to safety. Furiae...was behind us, a hood covering her face. She was acting as an "attendant" for the Hero of Roses. *I hope she behaves...*

The event had begun with a parade, and now, there were a bunch of nobles assembled and congratulatory addresses were being read.

It was taking ages...how long would this carry on for? Part way through, I'd set *Calm Mind* to 99% and had started practicing my water magic to pass the boring time.

As I was doing that, I heard fanfare from up high. *Oh?*

"Hero of Light, Ryousuke Sakurai! Come forth!"

"At once!" he replied.

Sakurai had finally been called down, so it was time for the main event. He strode up onto the stage wearing his shining silver armor. Joining him on stage were Highland's princes, the Sacred Nobles, and the pope—all important people that I'd seen at the meeting. There was someone positioned even higher on the stage, and I assumed that he was the king of Highland, though I had never seen him before.

"In the name of the Goddess of the Sun, Althena, I appoint you as leader of the Soleil Knights," Princess Noelle declared. Sakurai knelt, accepting the ceremonial sword she offered.

"It is an honor."

"How divine," someone nearby murmured.

"It is wonderful to see the reincarnations of our savior and saint alongside one another."

"It is magnificent to bear witness to such a splendid sight..."

Everyone seemed satisfied with the ceremony, which I assumed had been patterned after the legends of a thousand years ago. The beautiful Princess

Noelle, the handsome knight Sakurai—both, standing side by side... It certainly did paint a picture.

I could hear a “tch,” from Furiae behind me.

Come on, no curses here, I thought.

But suddenly, my train of thought was derailed by the sound of an explosion. The ground around us shook violently.

What?!

“It’s an attack!”

“Shielders! Ready!”

“Protect His Majesty!”

The well-trained knights murmured for a moment but quickly rallied. Of course, our group wasn’t just sitting and watching—we were headed toward Princess Sophia, alert to our surroundings along the way. Furiae...yeah, she was with us still.

I couldn’t see through the dense crowd, but there were more thudding explosions that quaked the ground.

“They’re from the Snake Sect!” someone hollered.

“They’ve got mages! Watch out!”

“Shielders, forward!”

“Get the healers! We’ve got wounded!”

The Snake Sect was carrying out a suicide attack? So...there wasn’t a rebellion of the beastmen after all. What a surprise.

I’d figured that the Snake Sect would be the last to appear. The invaders had come from the edge of the plaza, so I couldn’t really see them through the tens of thousands of Highland soldiers that were assembled. Guards surrounded and protected the royalty and nobility, so it didn’t seem like the Snake Sect had much chance of making a dent in Highland’s forces...

“Takatsuki!” Sasa called, drawing my attention toward the middle of the soldiers. Someone was moving weirdly through them?!

“There are enemies hiding among the soldiers!” I yelled as we headed for the princess.

Damn, no one’s noticed!

A Highland soldier had abandoned his post and was running toward Princess Sophia. I could hear him already chanting something!

“Someone, protect the prince and princess!” I yelled.

“Rahhhh!”

The geezer bodyguard was there! He stood in front of them, a bulwark of protection, as the terrorist disguised as a soldier finished his chant.

Suicide Magic: Fire Storm.

Suicide Magic?! It couldn’t get worse! That type of magic had been completely forbidden to us at the Water Temple.

That magic didn’t use mana, but rather, spent the caster’s *life*. The only benefit was that you could cast spells without a magic skill. But, that power was explicitly forbidden by the churches of the goddesses. Back at the Water Temple, they wouldn’t even discuss *how* the spells were used...and this terrorist had used it without hesitation.

“Glory to the cambions!” he screamed.

Damn it! I wasn’t going to make it!

As the caster tried to blow himself up, the bodyguard leaped for him, trying to shield Roses’s royals.

“Geezer!” I cried.

A moment later, the explosion rang out. A pillar of fire rose into the air, and I saw that it was just as powerful as some of Lucy’s high rank spells.

“N-No!”

“Geezer...”

Lucy and Sasa both screamed out in grief. Damn it! He’d made sure that no one around him had been hurt. But...he’d sacrificed himself.

“What a gallant knight...”

“Who was he?”

“A bodyguard from Roses, apparently.”

“A wonderful example of a knight...”

“Don’t let your guard down! There are pretenders disguised as Highland soldiers!”

The knights around me were reacting to the blast as well. I listened to the cacophony as I moved toward Princess Sophia and the smoke that hung over her.

Then, I saw the geezer, swallowed by flames.

Damn it all! I thought, collapsing to the ground. The flames finally died out, and the blackened corp— “*Suicide Magic?* How despicable! Lady Sophia, Prince Leonardo, are you safe?!” The *slightly* blackened figure of the bodyguard was swaying on his feet. The enemy Snake Sect soldier was in his arms, limp.

“What?” the three of us asked flatly. Actually, in our collective shock, more than just the three of us probably uttered that...

“Don’t let your guard down, everyone. They won’t hesitate to do anything! This is a vicious attack!” he declared grandly.

Come on! You’re pretty much uninjured!

I didn’t have *Mind Reading* like Fujiyan, but I was pretty sure I could hear everyone thinking the same thing. The bodyguard’s *Iron Wall* skill sure was impressive! Also, the attacker had blown himself up...but somehow, he was still alive?

So did *Suicide Magic* only use *some* of the caster’s life force? That...might actually be usable...

Don’t even think it! Noah screamed in my mind. *No. Suicide. Spells!*

Ah, right, I was just joking, goddess.

“Princess Sophia, Prince Leonardo, are you okay?” I asked. “Nice one, Geezer!”

He guffawed. "It's all thanks to your warning!"

"Hero Makoto, I am well. This has become quite the issue." The princess was casting healing magic on the bodyguard as she spoke.

"Sasa, stay with Prince Leonardo."

"Got it," she replied confidently.

The knights from Roses were gradually gathering around us as well.

"Lady Noelle!"

"Enemies!"

"They're disguised as soldiers!"

Other blasts were going off around us. Were they after the priestesses?

In an instant, the explosions vanished into light. Was that Sakurai? I glanced over and saw him protecting Princess Noelle. The enemies seemed powerless before him.

"Hey, Makoto? Is this the Snake Sect?" Lucy asked, surveying the area.

"Probably. That attacker shouted 'glory to the cambions' after all. It's not a well-organized strike, though..."

There were only a few dozen Snake Sect guerrillas attacking a place with tens of thousands of soldiers. Even if one assumed that the initial explosion outside was a diversion and they were actually after the priestesses...their attack had been utterly subdued. It was all pretty simplistic.

"Is that the end of them?" Princess Sophia asked. She'd been targeted, so her face was hard, but she was still acting calm.

"Looks like it," I stated. "Another attack while we're all so alert would..." My words trailed off. Highland soldiers were ferreting out anyone who was acting suspicious, so I didn't think there would be another battle. "If there's going to be another attack..." I restated, my mind occupied. I peered up at the sky and used *Scout*. Lucy followed my gaze. The clouds made the visibility poor, but among the cloud cover were...

"Wyverns!" Lucy shouted.

There was a group of them flying toward us! Had they been hiding among the clouds?

“Mages! Shoot them down!”

“We’re trying! There’re too many of them!”

The wyverns were snaking their way through the air toward us. Though the mage corps tried to intercept, they didn’t manage to take them out. I used my *Clairvoyance* skill to look at the riders. It was like another suicide squad.

They’re zealots...

“No good, fall back!” yelled a soldier.

About a dozen seconds later, the entire area was blown apart.

“Princess Sophia,” I yelled, grabbing onto her hand.

She looked shocked for a second, then seemed to infer what I meant. “Very well.”

I instantly synchronized with her and felt the raging river of her mana flow into me.

Water Magic: Snowman Battalion.

There were a lot of enemies, so we needed to respond in kind. I’d created several hundred snowmen that were a few meters tall.

The wyverns appeared in the air above us, but were swallowed up with faint puffs—my enormous snowmen engulfed the wyverns and Snake Sect riders alike. They could chill out in the snow for a while.

“Wow, what a cute spell, Takatsuki,” Sasa cheered.

“U-Umm,” Princess Sophia said hesitantly, tapping me on my arm with reddened cheeks.

“Scuse me, Princess Sophia,” I replied, going to let go of her hand...but she’d tightened her grip.

“You’re always...so abrupt,” she said, staring into my eyes and still clutching my hand.

“Makoto!” Lucy shouted, bonking me on the shoulder with her staff.

“What’s up, Lucy?”

“How long are you going to stare at each other?” she asked. “Those guys you froze are going down.”

The wyverns and their riders were indeed falling from the sky. And, from their current height, impacting the ground would definitely kill them if they weren’t lucky...

Fine, guess I’d need to risk myself as well.

Just as I made my decision, there was a quiet voice.

“Gravity Magic: Float.”

A huge magic circle glowed to life following the voice’s command, and the enemies started floating just before they hit the ground. I spied a short mage with white hair and a matching robe standing in the middle of the circle.

“Grandsage?”

“Sorry I’m late,” she said. “You had to clean up for me.”

The mana infusing the area was shaking. So this was her being “ready for war”?

“There’s bad energy in the air,” she commented with an unpleasant look. “It seems that there’s a retainer of Iblis here.”

The area stirred at her words. Some people screamed. Others started to tremble, and still others just hunched down on the ground.

“Iblis” was the name of the Great Demon Lord from a millennium ago. *The Great Demon Lord Iblis*. That name was a symbol of fear to the inhabitants of this world, and the terror of it was ingrained into their psyches.

If they reacted like that to just the name, would they even be able to *fight* once the Great Demon Lord returned?

“Grandsage, I offer our thanks for your aid,” said the prime minister as he arrived. The king wasn’t here anymore. Had he been evacuated?

“How could this happen?! How did these filthy heretics infiltrate our

renowned castle?!” demanded someone. I was pretty sure it was the first prince of Highland.

“Noelle,” wheedled a second voice. “Responsibility for this attack lies somewhere, and we need to find the source of it.”

That was probably the second prince. I couldn’t see Princess Noelle’s expression since she was behind Sakurai. The other nobility and clergymen all seemed safe. The soldiers were arresting the frozen members of the Snake Sect and taking them off somewhere, along with the wyverns.

Sorry it’s such an annoyance to deal with, I apologized mentally.

“Makoto, Hero of Roses. You have our thanks for dealing with the attack from the Snake Sect,” stated Princess Sophia as she stepped over to us. “It was magnificently done. Grandsage, I offer my thanks to you as well.”

I indicated that Lucy should take over the job of hiding Furiae, then stepped forward.

“It was a shock, but this is all they can muster?” laughed one noble.

“Well, they *are* empty-brained and filthy-blooded.”

“Indeed, indeed. It was a foolish attack.”

Things were starting to relax...but then, someone else spoke.

“No, I’m afraid things have only just begun.”

Everyone turned to focus on the speaker. The figure was standing atop the king’s throne upon the stage, in the highest position available.

It was...a very much out-of-place clown. A familiar clown. He’d been in Horn.

“Who are you?!”

“Get off of there now!”

Knights ran over to the stage.

“Wait.” The Grandsage spoke simply, instantly stopping the soldiers. “That man is being puppeted.”

“He is, Grandsage?”

“Oh?” mused the clown. “Ah, I see, you are the White Grandsage, a descendant of the legendary party!” His easy smile didn’t abate. Yet, when I looked closer, I could see that his eyes were empty. It was obvious to see that he was being controlled.

“That man,” I said, pointing at the clown, “was the one commanding the monsters that attacked Horn, right?”

The clown shrugged. “He was a disappointment.”

So...the clown is truly being used like a marionette—someone else is speaking through him.

“Despite all that time and money,” continued the puppet-clown, “he couldn’t crush Horn.”

“What?!” the geezer demanded.

“Now, now, calm down,” I said. After all, it would be foolish to respond to provocation—our enemy definitely wanted that. “Honestly, whoever came up with that plan screwed up,” I pointed out. “I mean, did the mastermind really expect those trash mobs to crush Horn? The cambions actually executing that flimsy plan did everything they could.”

Provocation was the best response to provocation.

“Certainly...” the puppet-clown replied after a pause. “So then, are you the new otherworlder hero?” His expression hadn’t changed, but I could hear the anger in his voice. Maybe he was more upfront than I’d expected.

“I’ll let you introduce yourself first,” I countered. Who *was* this guy? He probably had something to do with the Snake Sect at least.

The clown...or rather, the person controlling the clown, introduced himself. “My name is Isaac. I am our mighty leader Iblis’s son, Archbishop of the Snake Sect.”

Great Demon Lord Iblis’s son...? So that meant...

“You’re a demon lord?” I asked.

“No, Makoto,” Prince Leonardo started to explain. “The leaders of the Snake Sect all call themselves the Great Demon Lord’s son.”

“There are only the three demon lords on the demon continent,” Princess Sophia added.

“You fool!” the first prince proclaimed confidently. “I care not whether you’re an archbishop—your men are already defeated!” Well, the attack *had* failed. Archbishop Isaac didn’t reply; he just raised his hand skyward. Held in his grasp was a metal object that looked like an apple circled by a snake.

A pair of knights shouted out a warning.

“Watch out!”

“What’s he planning?!”

The item didn’t seem to have any mana in it, though. It was empty, already used.

“I used this tool back in Roses. It preserves our mighty father’s voice,” Isaac declared.

“What in the...?”

“Does he mean...?”

The soldiers all looked puzzled.

Could that be...

“Is that an item that creates blight monsters?” I asked.

Back in Horn, a giant on the verge of death had been transformed into a blight giant. When that had happened, I’d heard the Great Demon Lord’s voice, its juvenile claims...

“Hero Makoto?! Is that true?” Princess Sophia exclaimed.

“Oh... I’m impressed,” Isaac said. His tone mirrored his words.

“Before the blight giant awakened, I heard a childish voice,” I stated. “It spoke about warriors and going against fate.”

“That was almost certainly Iblis’s voice,” the archbishop replied.

So...talking about “fate” must’ve been a habit of the Great Demon Lord.

“The monsters we have tamed are currently massing around the city,”

continued Isaac with a grin. As the words left his mouth, I could hear a bell tolling rapidly from the gates.

“Reporting! There are monsters marching on the four gates!”

Some nobles around us began crying out in distress.

“At all four?!”

“Impossible! There was only an increased monster presence in the forest!”

“There is no problem,” the commander in chief of the Soleil Knights calmly answered, interrupting the panicking nobles. “The Soleil Knights and the Cardinal Knights were all assigned to the gates yesterday. The Temple Knights have all been reassigned as well, apart from the bare minimum needed to maintain peace within the city.” If memory served, Owain was the commander’s name. He was Sakurai’s boss, and his composure under pressure was just what I’d expect from the head of the country’s military.

“Oh...and here I thought we’d hidden the sea monsters. Impressive preparation indeed,” Archbishop Isaac commented, his calmness still intact.

“Hah!” a noble laughed. “This is nothing more than an imbecilic gathering of cambions, after all. They will never breach our defenses!”

“Just as I would expect from our Lord Owain,” another noble added. “We have nothing to fear from the filthy cambions!”

Well, I guess they were feeling confident again...

“Hmm, are you aware that there are several blight monsters mixed in?” inquired the archbishop. “I used this to awaken many blighted beasts.” He tossed the snake item lightly into the air and caught it.

“Blight monsters...” murmured a noble.

“And what of it?!” shouted another. “We have the Hero of Light. He has already defeated blight dragons in Labyrinthos!”

“Besides, even Roses’s hero can defeat them...”

“Precisely—if a lesser hero can defeat them, then blight monsters won’t help your plot.”

Wow, that was quite the backhanded compliment.

“Makoto, they’re mocking you,” Lucy muttered.

“They’re so rude!” Aya added.

“Hero Makoto, pay them no mind,” stated Princess Sophia.

“I was just gonna ignore them,” I replied after a pause. It was kinda surprising that Princess Sophia was joining the other two in my defense. But, none of them needed to worry about it. I turned to the Grandsage. “Should we capture him?” I asked.

“Keep him talking. He seems like the type to monologue.” She was watching the archbishop carefully.

Well, who am I to disagree?

“Are you sure that focusing only on the gates was the best plan?” Isaac smirked. “After all, do you not know of the beastmen’s plan to rebel?”

Man, how barefaced can you be? You’re obviously the one pulling the strings of that revolt.

“How vexing it must be! We have already rounded up the ringleaders!” the first prince declared smugly. It’s not like it was his achievement though... Most of it was uncovered by Fujiyan’s investigation, and Princess Noelle actually arrested them. I glanced over at her and saw that she looked unconcerned by her brother’s words.

Isaac laughed in amusement. “I see, I see. Good for you.”

“What are you laughing at?” the second prince demanded. But before waiting for an answer, he directed his subordinates to kill the man.

The clanging of the alarm bell still filled the area.

“R-Reporting!” a soldier yelled as he rushed in. “There are riots in the seventh and eighth districts! The main group involved are beastmen!”

The crowd around us grew noisier, and Archbishop Isaac’s face twisted into a grin. “Gah ha ha ha! Oh? How strange! I thought you’d captured the ringleaders! How in the world could this be happening?!”

The royal family and other nobles had completely lost their composure. There was no calmness to be found as they all shouted over each other.

“What have you done, swine?!”

“Those beasts chose the worst time to rebel!”

Still... I mused. This was impressive. It was all going as Furiae had said. I glanced her way, but the hood hid her expression.

“Hear my revelation! Fate decrees that Highland’s capital Symphonia will fall today!” Isaac spread his arms in the sky as he yelled out his declaration. He was really getting into it.

“U-Unthinkable...”

“Impossible!”

“Our city will never fall!”

“B-But...there is a large-scale monster attack...and at the same time, the cambions and beastmen are rebelling...”

“W-We need to get away!”

The crowd’s unease had reached its peak. Issac simply surveyed us all. Other than those in my group, only Owain still seemed to be calm.

Then, a cool voice cut across the area. “Nothing of the sort will be happening.” Her tone was clear, almost musical.

Princess Noelle.

Perfect timing. She’s like a film director.

“Oh, Princess Noelle, if I’m not mistaken,” the archbishop observed snidely. “The Priestess of the Sun and the reincarnation of the Witch of Salvation.” It looked like his expression wasn’t the only thing twisting—his personality was too. “And I suppose the boy next to you is the Hero of Light. We will need to deal with you both eventually, but that can wait. You can hide away in fear until that day comes. Incidentally, what was that proclamation supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what I said. Symphonia will not be falling.”

Isaac’s confidence hadn’t abated, but Princess Noelle was still placid.

“Noelle! What is this?!” the second prince exclaimed.

“Explain,” demanded the first prince.

“The beastmen uprising is connected to the weed that has been running rampant in the seventh and eighth districts.”

The archbishop shot her an amused look.

“Using that drug makes it easier for *Moon Magic: Brainwashing* to affect the mind,” Princess Sophia continued.

The Highlanders broke out into conversation.

“What?! That has never been mentioned before!”

“Relaxing our control of it in the lower districts has backfired...”

“To think...there was such a use for it.”

“Well, no one is researching moon magic...”

I honestly couldn’t blame them—we’d only found out about it yesterday.

“It took ten years,” the archbishop informed us proudly. “The plan was to gradually brainwash the demi-humans living within Symphonia. Curses take a long time to activate, but they are far from simple to undo. Once a curse is cast, it is impossible to unravel until its goal has been accomplished. The one I placed spread the following message: ‘if you hate the humans oppressing you, then destroy Symphonia.’” Archbishop Isaac continued on smugly. “There is no demi-human living within Highland that has not experienced some form of oppression by humans, so these words are effective on them all. The activation condition was...the sound of the bell! The very bell that warned your soldiers of an emergency. It is a sound that has not been heard, not even once, over these past ten years.”

He definitely did like to talk... He’d just told us everything.

And the bell was *still* going.

“Someone stop that bell!”

“I will send word right away!”

The nobility was now reacting with panic.

“Aha ha! It’s too late!” Isaac cackled. “You can’t stop a curse once it’s activated!”

“Are you sure you should be telling us all of this, Mister Archbishop?” I asked mockingly. Honestly, I was bored of just watching all of this unfold.

“Oh yes, Hero of Roses. Our plan is already complete. I already told you, did I not? *Fate* decrees that Symphonia will fall. None can oppose fate.”

Hmm, he certainly was confident in his plan...but, fortunately for us, we’d heard all about it from Furiae yesterday.

◇ Yesterday ◇

“I have conditions.” The moon priestess smiled bewitchingly. “But first, I will explain how Symphonia is to fall tomorrow.”

She proceeded to explain the Snake Sect’s plan. It was something that none of us had even imagined.

“They will use weed to brainwash the beastmen...?”

“I cannot believe they will make more blight monsters...”

“It strikes me as rather ironic... They will use the bell of peace to activate a revolt,” Fujiyan added.

“What if we stopped the bell from being rung ahead of time?” I asked.

“Then we won’t be able to inform the citizens of the risk’h,” Nina replied.

“And even if it solved the problem tomorrow, it would not solve the root cause,” Chris said.

“Indeed, it is quite the conundrum...”

We all had thoughts on the plot, but no solutions.

“Furiae,” I asked the silent woman. “Do you have a plan?”

“Yes. I can undo the curse. I have the skill *Moon Magic (God Rank)*.”

God rank... Apparently, that was the highest rank anyone could achieve.

“This is my condition for doing so,” Furiae stated, looking my way. “Hero of Roses—become my guardian knight.”

“Wha?” That came out of nowhere. She wanted me as a guardian knight?!

Princess Sophia was the first to react. “What are you saying?!”

“Lady Furiae...please explain your reasoning to everyone,” Fujiyan requested with a knowing look. He’d probably read her mind.

“Well,” she began, “if I help, the future will change. There will be no chaos in the town, and I won’t be able to escape. So, I need a hostage, right? And a guardian knight *has* to protect their priestess.”

“S-So by hostage...” Lucy trailed off with an unhappy look.

I still wasn’t following the logic. “How does being a guardian knight make me your hostage?”

“A guardian knight will lose half of their lifespan if they abandon their priestess. If their priestess dies, they lose all of their skills,” Princess Sophia explained.

“Don’t just tell him the disadvantages,” Furiae complained. “Becoming a guardian knight will also endow you with a blessing from the Goddess of the Moon.”

“That’s dark magic, right?”

“Possibly. It could also be *Curse Magic* or *Necromancy*.”

Dark magic’d be great—if I could pick at least.

“Why Makoto, though?!” Prince Leonardo demanded.

“Right! You could pick someone else!”

Furiae just smiled at their protests, offering no other answer. Still, I was sure it wasn’t *me* she wanted as her guardian knight.

“Furiae, don’t you want Sakurai to be your guardian knight?” I asked bluntly.

“D-Don’t be foolish! That’s not possible. Ryousuke’s the Hero of Light!”

Yup. I was right on the money.

“Hero Makoto...” Princess Sophia whispered to me. “Does she have feelings for the Hero of Light?”

“Yeah,” I answered. “That’s why she picked me. I’m close to him and it keeps the connection there.”

“Wh-What a decision...” she murmured, pressing a hand to her forehead.

“So, what will you do?” Furiae pressed.

“Makoto...”

“Takatsuki...”

Everyone was looking at me with concern, and I fell deep into thought.

Will you become the guardian knight of Furiae, Priestess of the Moon?

Yes

No

What to do? I hadn’t expected to see it as an *RPG Player* choice.

Furiae looked unhappy, so she could probably see it.

Makoto, are you gonna go through with it? Noah asked.

Are you against it?

Not really... she replied. *Naya isn’t on the planet anymore, so you might not get much of a blessing. Also, that priestess...will struggle on the southern continent.*

So Naya was away... Plus, no one seemed particularly eager for me to do it. Hmmm...

I looked at Furiae again. She was beautiful and didn’t look anything like a cursed priestess. Though, she didn’t seem like the luckiest either.

Then, I noticed it.

Is she shivering?

Her hand was shaking just a little. Though she looked the very picture of confidence, was she actually holding everything in? She’d told me that she

didn't have any allies in this world. Besides...

Sakurai asked me for help.

"What will you do, Hero of Roses?" Furiae asked again. Her voice was calm and no fear showed on her face. However, looking straight into her eyes, *I* could see that they were watering...

And I've got a weakness for that kind of thing. I made my decision.

"All right, Furiae."

Will you become the guardian knight of Furiae, Priestess of the Moon?

►Yes

No

"I'll become your guardian knight," I said, offering my right hand to her. She looked taken aback for a moment, then hesitantly reached out her own. I guess she hadn't expected that I'd accept.

"Th-Then it is settled, my knight. Also...call me *Princess* Furiae. I want to make our positions clear...is that acceptable?"



“You want me to call you...Princess Furiae?”

“I do... Thank you.”

Hmm, I suppose she’s just fussy about that?

Well, that’s typical Makoto, I heard Noah comment wryly.

“Hero Makoto, you...”

“Makoto... Well, I pretty much expected that.”

“Just like you, Takatsuki.”

Princess Sophia and my other party members didn’t exactly sound thrilled. Had they been expecting me to decline?

“So, how do we do this?” I asked.

“Kneel in front of me and kiss my hand,” Furiae instructed.

“R-Right...”

That’s kind of embarrassing... Oh well.

I knelt and took her hand, bringing the sculpted fingers toward my lips—

“W-Wait!” Princess Sophia interjected. “You just need to make the contract while your hands are connected!”

“Oh, is that so?” Furiae asked.

“Really, Princess Sophia?” I asked at the same time, both of us turning in unison.

“Why? Did you not know?” Princess Sophia asked regretfully.

Furiae just cleared her throat and continued. “Take my hand, then... I propose a contract with thee as my knight, under thy name... What is thy name?”

Come on, at least remember my name! I’m supposed to be your guardian knight.

“Makoto Takatsuki.”

“Oh, right... Under thy name Makoto Takatsuki. I appoint thee as guardian knight of the Priestess of the Moon. I place my faith in thee, and bless thee. As

long as thou shalt live, you will be my shield, my sword,” she declared solemnly.

Man, that’s cool.

I was just absently listening when she gave me a doubtful look.

“Excuse me, your answer if you would?”

Oh, so I needed to reply?

“I’ll work hard and do my best.”

“That...is a strange reply,” she said after giving me a steady glare. “Well, no matter.”

Well, what was I supposed to say?

Just then, my body started glowing faintly. I only had time to think, *Wait, what the?! before it stopped.*

“And now you should be my guardian knight,” declared Princess Furiae. “Check your Soul Book.”

“Oh, let’s have a look.” I opened it. Something new was indeed written there: “Guardian Knight of the Priestess of the Moon.”

My skills...hadn’t changed. *Maybe it’ll take a while?*

“Then, the contract’s complete,” I said to her. “I’ll leave tomorrow’s curse-breaking to you.”

“Indeed. I’ll unravel their shoddy spells,” Furiae announced, puffing up.

“Wait a moment,” Princess Sophia interrupted. “There are tens of thousands of beastmen in the city. How will you release all of them?”

That was a good question! Nina was nodding as well.

“Hmm, I suppose my voice would be the best vector for so many people. To unravel the curse, I can roam the city and sing,” she mused, a hand on her chin.

Right, so the cursed beastmen would just need to hear her.

“That could take hours’h...” Nina countered, her voice glum.

“Hundreds of people will probably lose their lives...” Chris added.

Okay...so we couldn't avoid losses? Wait a minute...

"Hey, Fu—Princess. Can you use anything other than your voice?" I asked.

"I could break the curse via touch or sight, but that takes even longer."

"Using the voice as a medium is the most efficient way of casting magic on a large, unknown number of people," Princess Sophia confirmed.

But...

"What about this?" I asked before explaining my idea.



"R-Reporting! The violence is gradually receding in the seventh district!" a soldier informed the people.

"Likewise in the eighth!" another added.

"What...was that...?" the archbishop asked blankly.

Ha ha, what a shock for you, I chuckled mentally.

"Archbishop Isaac of the Snake Sect. The riots will be under control shortly. Symphonia will not fall today," Princess Noelle declared firmly.

"Our princess!"

"How?"

"It's a miracle from Althena!"

"D-Don't mock me! This plan is a decade in the making! It cannot fail!" The panicked voice of the archbishop cut across the cheers of the Highland soldiers.

"Answer me, Princess! Those reports were false, weren't they! It doesn't make sense otherwise. Even *Sun Magic (God Rank)* couldn't remove a curse from that many people at once!"

Isaac spread his arms. Was he after sympathy?

"He's freaking out," said the Grandsage with a harsh smirk.

"He is," I answered with a grin of my own.

"Still," the Grandsage continued. "Using *Synchro* with the moon priestess and

spreading the curse removal through the rain... That was inspired thinking.”

“It’s a good way of doing it, right?”

“It wouldn’t have been a possibility under normal circumstances,” she scoffed. But then, she stretched. “Controlling the weather is tiring. I won’t do it again, even if you’re the one asking.”

“I gave you my blood for it, didn’t I?”

“Weather magic is worth *two* servings,” she griped. “Hand over the second.”

“Right, right, okay.”

Getting my blood drained kinda hurt, but oh well.

“The Priestess of the Moon!” Isaac suddenly exclaimed. “No one is more skilled at curses than the Snake Sect, except her! That whore is helping you, isn’t she?!”

Oh, he was a sharp one.

“Don’t be foolish,” the pope refuted. “Highland would never ask for the cursed priestess’s aid!”

Princess Noelle remained silent.

“Reporting!” announced a soldier. “The violence has settled! There are still some revolting, but they are few in number.”

“Thank you,” Princess Noelle said to the knight. She then turned to the archbishop and coldly addressed him. “Did you hear that? Archbishop of the Snake Sect, it sounds like you spent a large amount of time on your plan... A shame.”

“Impossible... Impossible...” murmured Isaac madly. “Fine! In which case...”

Suicide Magic: Fire Storm.

Crap! He was desperate!

“This is pointless,” the Grandsage commented, thrusting out a hand and chanting, “*Wood Magic: Ivy Prison.*”

Isaac’s stolen body was instantly surrounded by vines. They wound around his

arms, face, and the rest of him, preventing him from moving... Uh, could he breathe in there?

“Noelle, you can deal with him,” scoffed the Grandsage. “I doubt that this clown has much information since he was being controlled by the archbishop.”

“Thank you,” she answered with a bow. I was confident it would be dealt with.

“Grandsage!”

“Impressive as ever.”

“Her Highness was splendid as well!”

“Filthy-blooded plebeians are capable of little else...”

Those words, along with other yells, came from the Highlanders. Well, it *was* a good thing that humans didn’t end up in a civil war with the beastmen.

“Princess,” the pope spoke gravely. “There is something that weighs on me—the claim that we took the Priestess of the Moon’s aid to break the Snake Sect’s curse. Of course, I believe it to be nothing more than the ramblings of the filthy-blooded, but—”

Princess Noelle turned to him and spoke. “I acquired her aid to minimize casualties.”

“What?! Unthinkable! Our city is protected by Althena... Why would we request aid from filth of her ilk?!”

His face had gone red with rage. I’d thought of him as a nice person since he’d previously been against executing the beastmen! Now, he was kind of scary.

“Silence!” cried a voice. “Filthy blood this, filth that! Do you truly hate cambions so much?! It is thanks to my magic that the rebellion was suppressed!”

Damn, she’s snapped! She has a really short temper.

“Th-The Priestess of the Moon!”

“S-Seize her!”

“How? We can’t touch her!”

“She sure is beautiful...”

“Almost otherworldly...”

In moments, we’d been surrounded by soldiers. Had she already charmed some of them? They gradually grew closer to stop her from escaping.

However, Princess Noelle raised a hand to stop them. “I will say this—she is the reason that the brainwashing curse was removed... It was all thanks to Furiae.”

“Wh...at...?”

“Really?”

“So...we should let her go?”

The soldiers and nobles alike stirred in shock.

“I proclaim here, by my name, Princess Noelle, that Highland will forget its past enmity and work with the Priestess of the Moon to defeat the Great Demon Lord.”

Her face looked calm as she made her proclamation, but she hadn’t been entirely certain when we’d explained the plan yesterday... Eventually, she’d ended up capitulating to Sakurai’s persuasion, but she’d been against it to begin with.

Why did Highlanders hate Furiae so much?

“Impossible! How can you say that?!”

“Princess Noelle, you cannot make such decisions without His Majesty being present!”

“This is clearly illegal! Even you cannot get away with this!”

That sounded like the princes and prime minister, I thought. The five Sacred Nobles were just watching calmly.

“Father—His Majesty the King of Highland—has already assented to this. This is a document to that effect,” Princess Noelle said, exaggeratedly pulling out a piece of paper.

“His Majesty agreed?!”

“Impossible! He has said nothing of that!”

“How can you claim that?!”

Not everyone seemed on board, but if the king had already given the okay, things would probably be fine. Honestly, I was shocked that she’d managed to arrange all that in a single evening.

When I glanced over, I saw that Furiae was wearing a pout and had folded her arms, while Sakurai was looking on worriedly. I met his eyes—neither of us had a say in politics like this.

“I trust that will be all,” Owain said, projecting his voice over everyone’s complaints. “Symphonia is currently being approached by a vast array of monsters. We need to repel them first.”

At those words, everyone fell silent. *Nice one, commander!*

I’d just started to relax as everyone shut up, but then Owain approached *me*. “There are blighted beasts with the monsters. Even among Highland’s knights, very few soldiers have ever fought against them. I would greatly welcome the cooperation of you heroes.”

Gah, so that’s what he wanted... I honestly didn’t mind.

“That sounds entertaining,” the Grandsage commented, hopping up onto my shoulder and joining the conversation. “I will join as well.”

“You will join the battle personally?!” Owain asked in shock. “Do you not need to preserve your strength until the Great Demon Lord’s return?”

Oh, so that was why? I *had* wondered why she’d refrained from taking a frontline position.

“I will be supporting. My apprentice will be fighting. Isn’t that right, Redhead Mage?”

“Wha? M-Me?” Lucy asked in shock.

Wait, Lucy was her apprentice?

“She’s the great-granddaughter of Johnnie from Springrogue, and the Crimson Witch’s daughter. I personally guarantee her abilities.”

The Highland soldiers all cheered. That was a nice reaction, and all from mentions of her great-grandfather and mother's names. Apparently, her mother was a famous mage, and they'd certainly recognized the names.

But...

"Are you okay?" I asked Lucy quietly.

"Y-Yeah. I've managed to get my proficiency up, more or less..." That hesitancy was making me worry.

"We'll be helping too," I told her. "Right, Sasa?"

"Yup! Good luck, Lu!"

"Your Grace, Archdukes, I am temporarily taking command of the Temple Knights and the Four Cardinal Knights," the commander in chief told them. Owain then assigned groups of soldiers to each location.

The north gate would be manned by the Soleil Knights (the first and second divisions, at least), the North Cardinal Knights, and the Heroes of Roses (including me).

The south gate would have the Soleil Knights (third and fourth divisions), the South Cardinal Knights, and the Grandsage, plus her apprentice (Lucy).

The east gate would have the Soleil Knights (fifth and sixth divisions), the East Cardinal Knights, and the Temple Knights.

The west gate would have the Soleil Knights (seventh division), the West Cardinal Knights, and the Hero of Light.

Wait, hang on a minute.

"I'm at a different gate than Lucy?" I asked.

"What? No way!" Lucy said, meeting my glance.

"Are you going to come with us as well then, Elementalist?" the Grandsage said, her tone inviting.

H-Hmm... I glanced toward Princess Sophia and Prince Leonardo. We made up the Heroes of Roses, so only I would be separating off. And, most importantly...

"Leo...be careful," Princess Sophia said worriedly.

“I-I will!” he replied, even more nervously.

“We will protect Prince Leonardo! Am I understood, you louts?!” the geezer bellowed.

“Yessir!” his subordinates responded.

I’m worried about him... I thought. Back in Horn, he’d been overrun by a single blight monster.

“No, I’ll stick to the north,” I decided. “By the way, where’s the Hero of Lightning going?”

“Gerald...vanished while under house arrest,” Archduke Ballantine—his father—answered with a sour look.

Come on, Gerald, where’d you go?! It’s your time to shine!

“I heard that Highland had three other heroes...” I said, trailing off.

“The others are currently away from the capital carrying out other duties. You are the only heroes present...”

“I-I see...”

If we were backed by the strongest military on the continent, we’d be fine! Well...probably.

“To your posts,” Owain commanded. “Godspeed.” He would apparently be taking command of everyone from the castle.

With those final words ringing in our ears, each of us headed off toward our own battlefields.

◇ Symphonia — North Gate ◇

A dust cloud was approaching the city. The ground shook. A swarm of huge monsters trudged forward as one, kicking up dust in their wake as they moved toward the north gate. According to the reports, there were around five thousand of them.

The Soleil Knights, the North Cardinal Knights, and the allied forces of Roses were waiting to face the onslaught—it would be around ten minutes before we met.

As our troops marched to the north gate, the various commanders introduced themselves.

“I am Ortho, leader of the first division of the Soleil Knights. Well met, Heroes of Roses.”

“Leader of the second division, Stora. Let us fight together.”

“I am Berg, sub-leader of the North Cardinal knights. Good to meet you.”

We Heroes of Roses then gave our own introductions.

“I’m Leonardo, first prince of Roses and the Hero of Ice and Snow. It’s good to meet you.”

“I’m Makoto Takatsuki, the Hero of Roses,” I added to round things out...even as I felt somewhat overwhelmed by the other burly leaders.

I glanced around and noticed that someone was glaring my way. She was a beautiful knight clad in golden armor, with blonde hair and slanted eyes. I was sure that this was the first time we’d met, but she looked somewhat familiar.

Oh, she’s coming over here.

“I am the commander of the first pegasus division, Janet Ballantine,” she stated coldly. “I hear you were involved with my brother recently.”

“Umm...”

Oh, she’s the Hero of Lightning’s little sister! They look just like each other!

Uh, wait...that means the North Cardinal Knights...

I remembered the sub-leader apologizing and explaining that Gerald, the North Cardinal Knights’ commander, would normally be here... So these were *his* knights! It almost felt like their frigid gazes lowered the temperature of the air by a few degrees when they looked at me.

Owain, why?! Why would you put us here?! Is this bullying?! Is it?! Ugh, this is awkward...

There was no more conversation as we traveled.

◇ In Front of the North Gate ◇

The monsters weren't approaching quickly but were taking their time with an inexorable advance. Perhaps it was due to some mage controlling them, but all of the monsters seemed uncomfortably orderly.

It was like...they were conserving energy so they could rampage at the gate.

"They're getting closer, Makoto..." Prince Leonardo murmured, face pallid. He was shivering slightly.

"There is nothing to fear!" exclaimed the bodyguard. "The monsters number only around five thousand! Our forces are greater than ten thousand strong!"

Well, the geezer certainly seemed energetic. Actually, he was officially a guardian knight as well, wasn't he? Maybe I could ask him about the ins and outs of being one.

"Why are you getting high and mighty?" someone sneered, mocking the geezer. "You're just knights from a piddling kingdom."

"That's right, don't get in our way."

"It's not like your soldiers will be any help, is it?" cackled a third voice.

I looked up to see who'd spoken.

The pegasus division?

A group of female knights was centered around that Janet woman from earlier, and they were all riding pegasi. They were all beautiful, and that combined with the grace of the pegasi, well...it looked like they could have been a painting come to life.

But...

They don't seem like the nicest of people. I'd rather stay away from them.

"Hero Makoto of Roses, I trust you will prove that your defeat of my brother was no mere fluke," Janet said harshly. I'd just have to ignore her... It wasn't like I could do anything about it.

"Do we have any strategy?" I asked, turning toward Ortho.

"According to the scouts, the group approaching us contains no blight monsters," he replied.

“Oh, so they’re just a diversion?”

Phew, no strong monsters here.

“It would seem so. Do not let your guard down, though.”

“We will have the mages bombard the monsters before they arrive,” declared someone else.

“Indeed,” confirmed the commander. “We believe that we should be able to almost halve their numbers with magical attacks alone.”

I let out an impressed noise. Around us, there were more than a thousand mages all chanting spells. From what I could hear, they were all high rank as well. That should make a good initial salvo. And the monsters were all grouped together, so it seemed like it’d be effective.

I still would’ve rather been near the ocean, I thought.

There weren’t many water elementals here. But the gate closest to the ocean was where the Snake Sect’s main forces would attack, so Highland had directed the most firepower there. In other words...

Just as I was musing, my eyes were scorched by a bright flash. I peered back and could see a huge cross of light shining in the sky by the western gate.

“That would be the Hero of Light,” commented a Soleil Knight.

“His legendary *Sword of Light* skill is always overwhelming.”

“There must have been a blight monster...”

I listened to their commentary. Sakurai’s skills were all so flashy. However, it looked like the bulk of the enemies *were* on that side.

“It seems that the battle has started at the western gate.”

“The fighting will reach us soo—hm?”

The chatter was suddenly cut off by a screech similar to the cry of a keening raptor.

“What is that?!” The geezer pointed toward a huge bird made of fire that’d just appeared. It soared in the air near the southern gate.

“A fire phoenix... That’s *Fire Magic (King Rank)*. I’m shocked we have someone capable of it,” commented a Soleil Knight. I was surprised too.

But then...I recognized the feeling of the mana in that spell.

It was Lucy.

“She can use king rank magic now...”

The battle hadn’t even started, but my eyes were already watering. Back in Macallan, I’d spent a long time training Lucy’s fire magic with her. I’d honestly started to think of her king rank skill as more of a fashion accessory than anything else. Since then, she’d grown so much...

Sometime soon, I’d have to get her to demonstrate up close.

“Th-That’s Lucy’s spell?!” the prince asked in shock.

“Incredible!” the guardian geezer added.

Sasa was with her too—I’d felt bad about leaving Lucy on her own, even if she was with the Grandsage.

“A mage from Roses? Hm...impressive.” Even the sub-leader of the North Cardinal Knights was impressed. Hearing praise heaped on my friend certainly put me in a good mood, but something was worrying me.

“The weather cleared up...” I complained.

I wasn’t sure if it was because of Sakurai’s skill or Lucy’s spell, but the rain I’d gotten the Grandsage to conjure was now gone. There were still clouds, but the drizzle had stopped.

Would I be able to use my water magic? I looked back at the approaching monsters and could see their large forms distantly.

“They’re here,” I said.

“Indeed,” replied a commander with a nod.

Then, my *RPG Player* skill activated.

“Hm?”

The choice was a disconcerting one.

Will you fight the ancient monsters?

Yes

No

Ancient, *huh? That...worries me.*

“Does anyone here have an *Appraisal* skill? Ultra rank if possible,” I called, looking around at the various knights.

“I do, Hero,” someone answered with a raised hand. They looked like a mage.

“What more do you need to know?” The pegasus division had started up their jeering again. “Are you scared, Hero of Roses?”

“Perhaps the monsters have made him lose his nerve.”

I ignored them and spoke to the mage. “Can you check to see if any of the monsters are ancient...over a thousand years old?” I asked.

“You think there are ancient monsters in the group?”

“Probably...” I muttered.

“Wait a moment.” Everyone’s attention was gathered on the mage and me. After what felt like ages, the mage spoke again. Their voice was shaking. “I-I’ve confirmed it.”

“So?” asked one of the soldiers. “Are there?”

“Are you quaking in your boots there, little her—”

“They all are!” the mage interrupted.

Everyone collectively emitted a shocked gasp.

Ack, damn it... All of them? Monsters a millennium old...they’ll definitely be stronger than the norm.

“Every single one... All of them. The five thousand monsters coming toward us are all remnant beasts from a thousand years ago!” exclaimed the mage.

“I-Impossible...”

“It cannot be!”

Everyone’s expressions changed completely.

Uh...are we in more trouble than I thought? Isaac, you schemer!

“Mages, fire now!” Several thousand flashes of light burst into being at Ortho’s command. The spells struck the monsters, causing blasts and detonations. “Start your next spells immediately!” he commanded. “Our enemies are all ancient monsters! This wave alone will not defeat them!”

I might’ve been imagining things...but the roar of the approaching monsters seemed to almost answer the commander’s words. The beasts burst forward through the initial blast of spells, and...

I couldn’t even see a single corpse?! What happened to defeating *half* of them? Though, I suppose that calculation must have been based on the strength of normal monsters.

“Can we win?” I asked the sub-leader.

“With our current forces...likely not. I have called for reinforcements.” His voice was tense but calm. If he’d called for backup, then there was only one thing we could do.

“Let’s buy some time,” I said. “Prince Leonardo, give me your hand.”

“R-Right! Hyah!” he yelped girlishly. Even though I felt bad, I carried on.

“*Synchro*. Also, elementals, lend me your strength!” I called, combining the mana from the prince and the elementals. “*Ice Magic: Ice wall!*”

There was a rumbling as I generated a wall of ice—it rose up between us and the monsters, as thick and tall as I could make it.

“W-Wow.”

“H-He created a wall of that size without even chanting.”

“So much mana.”

The knights all stirred, but my barrier would only buy us time.

“Earth mages! Reinforce that wall!”

“Those at the wall, kill the monsters as they reach it!”

“Mages, fire your next volley past the wall! Keep firing until you’re out of mana!”

With those commands, violent combat began on both ends of the wall. The mages rained down magic beyond it. But then...

“Griffins!”

“Wyverns too!”

Flying monsters had started rushing over the wall! They weren’t like any wyverns or griffins I’d ever seen before—their bodies were entirely pitch-black, and of course, over a thousand years old!

Right, let’s do this! I thought, readying my dagger.

“Listen! Protect the heroes! We cannot lose them to a battle like this!”

“Sir!”

Uh? Hang on, what?

The Soleil Knights had suddenly taken up a formation around the prince and me.

“Princess Noelle gave the orders. We are to prioritize Sir Leonardo and your own lives as heroes of another nation,” someone explained.

“Is this really the time for that?” I asked.

“Thanks to you, we know about their ancient status ahead of time, and you created defenses as well. The rest is up to us!”

“Please, fall back.” Even the sub-leader implored us to do so, and he stood in front to shield us.

The knights were fighting, but they were falling one after another.

Each of the monsters was uncommonly tough, and even when one seemed defeated, it would stand back up again. The ice wall holding them back was starting to crack, and I could hear huge thuds of monsters ramming into it from the other side.

If it breaks, the land-bound monsters will attack en masse...

We were on the ropes already... It would spell our doom if we were overrun like that.

"Look up!" someone screamed.

"A red dragon!"

Above us, a knight riding a pegasus was locked in fierce combat with a flying dragon.

"Water Magic: Ice Spear!"

Just before it could close its teeth around her, I fired a spear into its eye.

The beast roared in anguish.

"Thank you!" the pegasus knight shouted down at me.

"It's still coming!" I yelled back. I'd only distracted it, and the dragon's roar had transitioned to an angrier tone as it readied its fire breath. *"Water Magic: Ice Spear!"* I yelled.

Using the last of my mana, I pierced its other eye.

The dragon's fire breath seared across the sky...away from the knight.

Elementals...elementals... I chanted in my mind.

But there was no response. Water elementals preferred peace, so they probably hated the chaos of a battlefield. There weren't many of them here to begin with, and now, I couldn't hear any. Conjuring the wall had used up all the mana I'd borrowed.

What should I do? The monsters weren't decreasing in number, and they pressed ever on. Even with *Calm Mind* dialed up, I was getting uneasy and twitchy.

But then, I heard something.

Sun Magic: Thunderbolt!

A massive bolt of lightning struck the red dragon, knocking it and some adjacent wyverns from the sky. Wind buffeted us.

The Grandsage?!

“You call yourselves the strongest Cardinal Knights in Highland?! Look alive!” shouted a gleaming figure. He wore golden armor and had shining blond hair. His aura made him look like a living lightning bolt as he strode forward.

It was Gerald, the Hero of Lightning.

Perfect timing! The hero's always late, after all.

“Yes, Sir Gerald!” the Cardinal Knights roared in unison. The Soleil Knights looked relieved as well. We were counterattacking then?

Suddenly, the ice wall broke with a sharp *crack!* Monsters poured in through the fissures.

“Take this, you beasts!” Gerald leaped into the fray, then headed directly to the spot where the monsters had breached the wall.

Whoa, was he pulling a kamikaze run?! He sure was a hero.

“M-Makoto,” stammered Prince Leonardo, “does Gerald know that they are ancient monsters from a millennium ago?”

I suddenly realized the severity of the circumstances, and the commander by my side seemed to as well. “Ah...” we said simultaneously.

D-Damn it, we have to warn him!

“Hey, Gerald!” I yelled.

“Lord Gerald!” called Ortho.

“Drop dead!” Apparently, in the midst of his charge, Gerald couldn’t hear us. He kicked up dust as he rushed the monsters.

Uh, he'll be okay, right? I looked worriedly over in his direction, but I could see the golden knight fighting energetically.

“Oh, they’re pretty strong!” he cried out as he sliced through beasts.

Phew, guess he was safe. Every time he swung his crackling (and probably) magic sword, enemies were torn apart and scorched. Even these ancient monsters were no match for him.

“He seems okay!” I shouted.

“Indeed! That’s our Hero of Lightning!”

The Soleil Knights breathed a sigh of relief as well, but not everything was solved.

“Aid Sir Gerald!”

“Brother!”

The sub-leader and the pegasus division, led by Gerald’s younger sister, all rushed to assist him. It was a good thing too—the burden of slaying ancient monsters would have been too much for the Hero of Lightning alone.

“Mages! Cover fire!” ordered the leader of the second division.

“Sir! The mages are beginning to run out of mana!”

“Curses. The knights and clerics are still hanging on, but...”

The knights were covered in a violent aura, but the clerics supporting them from behind looked exhausted. Fatigue infused Symphonia’s defenders. In comparison, the monsters were throwing their all into the attack. That must be how monsters act when controlled... It certainly wasn’t one of the nicer tactics that the Snake Sect had used.

Where do we even go from here? I wondered.

I glanced at Prince Leonardo to find him staring back in worry. “M-Makoto...at this rate...”

We’ll be overrun before reinforcements arrive. If the gate fell, then hundreds of citizens would die. I could feel eyes on me. The Soleil Knights and Roses’s troops were all looking our way.

They think we should be able to do something because we’re heroes, huh? Actually, is this how Sakurai feels all the time?

I didn’t cope well with attention, and Sakurai managed to fulfill the role of the savior’s reincarnation. We’d need to go out for a drink at some point. Before that, though, I needed to deal with the problem in front of us.

What can I do? I asked myself, setting *Calm Mind* to 99%.

I was out of my own mana, and it would take some time before I could use the elementals again. Prince Leonardo didn't have much mana left either, so I couldn't borrow any more from him.

If Princess Sophia were here—no, the battlefield is no place for a princess. I shouldn't rely on things I can't have.

Something... Anything... Just some kind of trump card.

"Elementals, help me," I said, unconsciously slipping into their language and reaching a hand out. There was a little blue elemental floating in front of me, and it flew right through my hand. Guess I couldn't touch them. I'd considered using *Synchro* with the elementals, but that wouldn't happen if I couldn't actually hold onto them...

"If there's anything...anything I can do, I'll do it," I pleaded in the same language, arm still outstretched.

There was no answer.

Just as I slumped in defeat, I heard something.

"Hey, do you need a hand?" a voice murmured into my ear.

This...wasn't the usual childish voice that the elementals spoke in. I turned around to see a beautiful girl with completely blue skin. With one glance, I could tell that she wasn't a real person.

"An elemental?" I asked after a pause. I'd never seen one that looked so...human.

She almost looked like Noah.

"You have a familiar scent," she said in the language of the elementals.

"What?"

But the elemental in the form of a girl didn't answer—she placed her palm in mine, engulfing my hand in a chill.

Sh-She's touching me? Can I use Synchro with her?

◇ The Hero of Lightning's Perspective ◇

I didn't know how many monsters I'd cut down. When I hit the tenth, I

stopped bothering to count. I just wanted to focus on defeating them.

“Sir Gerald!”

“Brother!”

My Cardinal Knights and my younger sister were coming to offer reinforcements.

“Don’t get too close!” I yelled. “Focus on support!” I was currently fighting them, so I knew that these were no ordinary monsters. Even an average, higher-tier knight would be no match for them.

As I fought, I glanced around to get a perspective of the battlefield. I saw that the Cardinal Knights were fighting in the center and the Soleil Knights were off to the sides. The pegasus division and the mages were attacking the flying monsters.

But...it’s not going well.

We were being steadily overrun. I cast a sidelong look at the hero from Roses.

What are you playing at?! Use the spell that defeated me!

However, he didn’t show any sign of casting.

“Damn it! That coward!” Was he scared of these things?!

I’d just redirected my attention back to the monsters when suddenly, it happened. An overwhelming chill enveloped me, snaking up my back. I froze.

I remembered fighting a dragon when I was young.

I remembered challenging that old hag and getting trounced.

I remembered an otherworlder showing up and stealing my childhood friend and fiancée.

The chilly, dreadful sensation was similar to what I’d felt during those moments in my life. I whirled around.

“Wh-What in the world?”

“Magic...?”

“R-Run! We’ll get caught up in it!”

The knights at the north gate were in a panic, and as I turned, I could see why. A giant was breaking the skyline...one made of water.

“What...in...the...”

The soldiers weren't the only ones scared of it—even the monsters seemed terrified. The giant looked down at us before slowly swinging a massive arm at the ground in front of it.

“Ahhh!”

“H-Help!”

“W-We're gonna die... Wait?”

“Nothing happened?”

The blow had looked like an indiscriminate attack, but in the end, it had only struck the monsters. In one swipe, the giant's water limbs engulfed the enemies on the ground and those in the sky. They were trying to escape, but it looked like they couldn't. An impressive spell...

Everyone watched agape. When the giant seemed to contain all the monsters within its watery form, it pivoted and began to lumber toward the sea.

I turned toward our dazed soldiers and spotted the familiar brat. Immediately, I dashed over to him. “You! Did the Hero of Roses cast that?!” I shouted.

“He did!” the kid confirmed with sparkling eyes. “It was Makoto!” He seemed overjoyed.

“And you're okay with that?” I asked, scoffing. “He'll end up as Roses's representative hero at this rate.”

“Makoto is amazing!” The Hero of Ice and Snow had a face flushed like a maiden, and I didn't feel like pressing him any further.

“Tch, if he could do that, he should have done so from the start...” I felt like an idiot for rushing over.

“Oh,” commented a voice from behind me. Out of nowhere, someone had suddenly appeared. “So the reinforcements have arrived, but for what? The battle is already over.”

“Grandsage!”

“Don’t just appear, old hag,” I said.

“What was that?” she replied, hitting me. *Oww*. “What an ill-mannered student you are. That spell is strange, though.”

She was looking upon the giant with admiration.

“What the hell is it?” I asked. I could only feel a piddling pool of mana coming from the hero, so how’d he do it?

“I don’t know,” replied the Grandsage.

“What?”

Don’t lie—you know everything.

“It’s like the elemental magic that Johnnie used...” she continued, “but I cannot use it myself.”

“And your only point of comparison is the legendary mage Johnnie Walker?” That was one of her party members from a thousand years ago. Saying that this spell was similar to his magic... Those otherworlders were all the same.

“Gerald. The elementalist is probably out of control. Go help him,” the Grandsage instructed.

“What?” What the hell did she mean? Earlier, his attack had only hit the monsters. How was that *not* in control?

“The giant is swaying,” she explained. “He might not be using the magic consciously. It’s dangerous for him. He pushed himself too far to help you Highlanders.”

“Tch...” For real? *That* was unconscious? Don’t screw with me.

“Off you go,” she said, kicking me in the back.

“Ow, you damn hag!” I yelled back. But I followed her direction, using flight magic to pursue the giant. What a pain!

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

The monsters were all suspended in the water that made up the giant’s body.

I didn't know what I would do with them now, but I'd decided to take them out to sea.

I feel awful...

Things felt strange, like when I'd had too much to drink. This was the first time it'd happened to me, but at least I knew *what* was happening—I was manasick, drunk on mana, like Lucy was quite often. Plus, there was a gorgeous elemental next to me.

"Are you having fun?" she giggled. The cute, blue-skinned elemental smiled at me. She'd told me her name earlier: Arch Elemental of Water, Undyne.

Essentially, she seemed to like me, so she'd helped. I was currently *Synchro*'d with her, and mana gushed forth from her form like water. Elementals possessed infinite mana...or something. It wasn't like Princess Sophia or Prince Leonardo where there was a limit; with Undyne, I didn't know when to stop. I was heading toward the sea, and after that, what would I do...?



“Hey, won’t you play with me forever?” the girl that looked like Noah offered with an inviting grin. It was a tempting proposition...

Hmm? Something was coming this way? Who was it?

Oh. That blond guy with the nasty look. He’d flown into my giant.

“Get it together!” Gerald yelled, hitting me.

“Guh!”

He grabbed hold of my collar and shook me vigorously back to my senses. Suddenly, the giant lost its shape and all the monsters were expelled. Some of them drowned, others swam out into the open sea, and so on. Not one of them headed back toward Highland, though.

Undyne had vanished.

Should I leave those monsters be? I wondered.

Most of them had escaped into the water... *I could give chase and finish them off*, I thought vaguely before my wooly mind made a connection.

Hang on. I’m in midair, aren’t I?

“You!” shouted an angry voice from above me. I peered up and saw Gerald holding me up in the air. “Back with us?”

“Y-Yeah.” Whoops. Apparently, the Hero of Lightning had come to save me.

“The hag made me come get you. She said your magic was out of control.”

“Ack.”

That was the second time it’d happened. This was bad—I’d be on the Grandsage’s menu again.

“We’re going back. Can you fly?”

“I cannot.”

“Why not?!”

Flight magic was a mid rank spell. A mage apprentice couldn’t use it.

“Damn it. Hold on,” he spat, carrying me back toward the shore.

“Uh, thanks, Sir Gerald.” He *was* an archduke’s son, so I figured I should be careful with my words. Even if it was a bit late...

“Don’t bother with the ‘Sir.’”

“Uh, Mr. Gerald?”

“Or that. Just use my name.”

I wasn’t fond of addressing people casually when I wasn’t close with them.

“Jerry?” I suggested.

“I’ll kill you.”

Eep.

“Thanks, Gerald.”

Silence.

He didn’t even respond!

There was no more conversation after that, but he took me to the north gate where the others were waiting.

“Makoto!” the prince cheered, hugging me.

“Hero! Your spell was outstanding!” said the guardian geezer. It seemed that he was safe as well.

“That was splendid, Hero Makoto.”

“*You* ended up saving *us*,” said a pair of Soleil Knights with awkward smiles.

“Is everyone else okay?” I asked.

“Thanks to you. The heavily wounded have been taken for treatment.”

That was good news...though I didn’t know how many people we’d lost.

“Reporting! All four gates have successfully repelled the monsters!”

“Did you all get that?! We won!”

In response to their commander, a great cheer rose up from the men.

Right, guess we finished it. That was good.

The celebrations continued for a while, and then someone approached me. They wore golden armor and had hair that shined in the same color. He looked at me, and the soldiers of Roses around me, then turned away.

Uh? Did he not want something?

“Hero of Roses, you saved the North Cardinal Knights,” Gerald proclaimed without turning around. “But don’t misunderstand me! You’re stronger right now! The next time we fight, though, I’ll win!”

“R-Right...”

But I don’t want to fight you...

“You saved us. Thanks.” And with that, he left.

What was he, a *tsundere*?

“Makoto, let’s go back to my sister,” Prince Leonardo suggested. “I’m sure she’s worried.”

“Yeah, let’s.” I wanted to see Lucy and Sasa again too. They were safe, right?

“It is finally over,” remarked the guardian geezer.

I nodded. “Well...let’s get going.”

I’m so tired...

The chaos facing Symphonia was over.

Chapter 8: Makoto Takatsuki Realizes His Own Power

After the battle with the ancient monsters, I collapsed on my bed at the inn and slept like the dead. When I came to, I was with my goddess.

“Noah?”

Her usual smile and wily looks were gone, replaced by an odd expression of quiet contemplation. Noah’s head was propped in one hand as she gazed at me. Was she in a bad mood?

“Say...Makoto.”

“Y-Yes?” Had I done something to annoy her?

“My disciples in the past were known as strong swordsmen, genius mages, and many other things.”

“Oh, so you’re talking about your other men?” I *was* curious, but I also kinda didn’t want to hear it.

“Don’t put it like that,” she scoffed. “My disciples weren’t necessarily men—there were girls too. There were a lot of them. All sorts of people. But, Makoto...”

“What?”

“Using *Synchro* with elementals should be impossible. Particularly for humans.”

“But...I managed it?” I half asked. Undyne’s sudden appearance had been a shock, but it had been a lot of help as well. “Actually, Undyne kinda looked like you. Are you two related?”

“Oh, that? Elementals don’t have set forms, but they revere the Titanea. That’s probably why she imitated me.”

“Oh...” That explained their similar looks—it was because Noah’s cute. Made

sense to me.

“You’ve gotten us off topic.”

“Right, what is it?” I asked, smoothing out my expression and looking her way.

“In order for someone to synchronize with elementals, there is a steep condition: you need to be over level 1000 in magic mastery.”

“Eh? A-A thousand?”

Mine was...something like 200 right now. Lately, all my practicing hadn’t raised it at all. Although, I suppose it *had* gone up when I’d fought Gerald.

Was such a high number even realistically possible?

“It is not...not at all,” replied Noah, answering my thoughts. “It is impossible for a human to reach that level in their lifespan of around a hundred years.”

“But...I synchronized with her?” I pointed out.

She snorted at my confused expression before waving some paper my way.

“You just took my Soul Book aga—” I started to protest. But when I saw the writing upon it, my words cut off.

Priestess of the Moon’s Guardian Knight: Charm.

I didn’t remember seeing that skill before.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“The skill you were given for becoming bound to the moon priestess.”

“A charm skill...” So *this* was my reward for becoming Furiae’s guardian knight? Aww, I missed my chance for *Curse Magic*...that’s a shame.

“None of that,” Noah chastised. “This skill is probably why Undyne helped you.”

I looked at her questioningly. Did charming elementals let you synchronize with them?

“Even so...200 mastery should not be high enough...”

“Shouldn’t it?”

Noah pondered for a moment. “I don’t know why, but Undyne of Symphonia seems awfully taken with you.”

“Is it because I built up my relationship with the elementals in the capital?” I *had* been training every day.

“Elementals are whimsical by nature... Just think of this as a lucky break...” She trailed off before speaking again. “I was so worried watching you.”

Noah sighed as she twirled her beautiful silver hair. The gesture...was kinda hot.

“Though,” she continued, “I’m also happy you’ve gotten stronger.” She turned a molten gaze on me and chuckled. “Just so you know—when you were synchronized with her, and *only* then, you were god rank.”

I expelled a flabbergasted noise.

What did she just say?

“What else would you call a mage that controls the infinite mana of an elemental?”

“Uh...” I droned. “But, uh...”

Really? Noah wasn’t just fudging things?

“Are you doubting your goddess?” she asked, slapping me on the forehead. “I’m warning you. You couldn’t control that elemental magic at all, could you? You know that now, right?”

“Yeah. I think I really was out of control. I don’t really remember it well...”

“You were dangerous. The slightest slip would have seen the whole capital underwater.”

“Come on, that’s exaggerating.”

“It is not,” she countered. “It would’ve been all too easy to fail. That’s how elemental magic is.”

Seriously?

“Delicate control isn’t the strong suit of elemental magic—it’s made to work incredibly well on a large scale. It isn’t magic meant for defeating a single

person, but for killing thousands. It isn't for battle; it's for war. That's why the Sacred Deities put restrictions on it."

"For war..."

O-Oh, was it?

"It's great for me, though, since I only have one disciple." Noah snickered.

"So...all's well that ends well, right?"

"You're stronger now, but be careful," she warned. "If you go too far like before, you'll have the Sacred Deities looking your way. Plus, losing control of elemental magic could easily wipe a town off the map."

"I'll be careful," I promised. After all, I still remembered getting scolded by Eir at the Habhain Islands.

"One more thing," she said, placing her hand on my cheek. "This is important."

"We're not done...?"

"No, this is very, very important. Why do you think the priestess's charm skill didn't work on you?" Noah asked. "Ordinarily, no living thing can refuse her."

"Uh? Well, because..." Right, even Sakurai had been charmed. "*Calm Mind* means that charm and fear skills don't affect me...right?"

Noah shook her head. "Skills like *Calm Mind* and *Serenity* only give resistance—they don't render the skills ineffective. Her *Charm* skill is god rank, after all. No human can resist it."

"But I was fine."

Noah suddenly drew closer.

"My version of *Charm*, by the way, is god rank. In fact, my skill level is the highest out of any of the gods! I'm said to be able to charm anything! A single glance from me can drive a person crazy!"

I sighed. She might say that, but her excitement had her waving her hands around. She was definitely cute, but being the best out of all the goddesses was perhaps a bit of an exaggeration.

“And yet, my one and only disciple thinks I’m exaggerating!”

Ack, she read my mind.

“Whatever,” she sighed. “I’ll just tell you: there is a reason that charm skills and the fear skills of the blight monsters don’t affect you.” Her eyes sharpened as she paused. “It’s because of your *RPG Player* skill.”

“What? But my Soul Book doesn’t say anything about immunity to debuffs.”

“It doesn’t, but *RPG Player* has a perspective change component, doesn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

Using my skill, I could see from a point behind myself. In other words, I could view the world using a third-person perspective; it was basically like how a gamer observed the map and characters in an RPG. The skill offered just a little bit of convenience—I never needed to look behind myself. Honestly, it didn’t add to my combat potential at all. *RPG Player* had nothing to do with debuffs...or so I’d thought.

Noah let that revelation sink in, then continued. “By viewing the environment through the lens of *RPG Player*, your actual perspective shifts to one outside of the world.”

Outside of the world? “What does that mean?”

“Hmm, how to explain...” she mused as she twirled her hair. “When you played RPGs, if your character became confused, you as the player didn’t also get confused. Right?”

“Well yeah, of course not... Oh. That’s how it works?”

“It is. *RPG Player*’s perspective peers into this world from the outside.”

That was incredible...

“It’s rare,” she stated. “After all, it stops even god rank *Charm* in its tracks.”

“But in combat...”

“Yeah, it’s no help.”

I already knew that. As far as non-combat skills went, Fujiyan’s *Mind Reading* was more convenient. Sasa even had extra lives. When would I get *my* powerful

skill?

Well, my elemental magic was getting stronger, so I'd just turn my focus in that direction.

"Makoto, this is the important part. Do you know *RPG Player's* weakness?"

"Weakness?" I asked. My skill just made it harder to affect me with mind-altering magic. Why would it *have* a weakness?

"It does. Looking in from beyond our world...lessens your sense of fear. You can deal with more or less any danger in a fairly calm manner. That would be fine, except you throw yourself *into* that danger and purposefully pick risky options, don't you?"

I fell silent, remembering the giant, remembering the dragon. Maybe I did lack a sense of danger.

"That's a bad weakness, huh?"

"Maybe. But it also means that you've continued being my disciple even though I'm a wicked deity, so I'm thankful for it." She suddenly grinned and started mussing my hair. "I just wanted to warn you about that. Keep your promise—grow stronger. Your skill enables you to do outrageous things while keeping a cool head, but if you keep pushing too hard, then one day, you'll lose."

"I understand."

"Off you go then!" Noah said suddenly, shooing me away. "You've got visitors."

"Visitors?" I repeated.

She grinned at me. "Aren't you popular?"

Uh, what?

"Good luuuck!"

She waved her hand, and I was engulfed in light.



"Makoto, you sleepyhead."

“Wake up, Takatsuki!”

I opened my eyes and saw two girls—one whose long scarlet hair was tickling my face, and another with chestnut brown hair who was crawling up the bed like a cat.

“Morning, Lucy, Sasa,” I answered with a stretch.

“More like night,” Lucy teased.

“You’ve been called to the castle. Let’s go!”

“Buuut...” My body felt like lead. It was probably an aftereffect of synchronizing with Undyne, but I certainly didn’t want to get out of bed.

“I’m just gonna sleep,” I decided, curling up farther into the covers.

Ah, so nice. I worked hard today... A little rest won’t hurt anyone.

“What do we do, Princess Sophia?” I heard Lucy ask.

“Takatsuki won’t wake up,” Sasa added.

“My, what *will* we do with our hero?”

Hmm? Was that Princess Sophia? Nah, there’s no way she would—

My thoughts were cut off by the yelp that forced its way out of my throat. Freezing! Someone had just stuck a cold hand down the back of my neck!

“You can call this payback for always using *Synchro* out of nowhere,” said a cool voice. Well, Princess Sophia was indeed here, and she had a mischievous look on her face.

G-Guys...you do know this is my room, right? Why had they all barged in here?

“Lady Noelle said that the Hero of Roses absolutely had to be there,” Princess Sophia explained, smoothing my bedhead with a soft smile. “Will you come along, Hero Makoto?”

I paused for a moment before the concession slipped out of my mouth. “I will...” How was I supposed to say no to that face?

Lucy and Sasa exchanged looks.

“Why does he listen when it’s the princess?”

“It’s not faiir.”

What do you mean, fair? Considering that I’m a State-Authorized Hero, she’s essentially my boss, right?

They quickly moved on from their complaints though.

“I’ll get his top off!” Lucy cheered.

“I’ll get his pants then,” said Sasa.

“I can dress myself!” I didn’t want to get stripped in front of the princess, so I quickly ushered them all outside.

Huh. So Lucy, Sasa, and Princess Sophia had all been together? *I wonder what they talked about...* It weighed on me, but I was scared to ask.

I changed my clothes and then heaved myself toward Highland Castle. Once we arrived, I saw that there was a party in the banquet hall, and the festivities were in full swing. It was the second celebration I’d been to in Highland Castle, but this one seemed pretty different from last time.

“Hero Makoto! You were magnificent!” someone called.

“Would you be interested in a joint exercise with the Soleil Knights?”

“Please, spend some time with the North Cardinal Knights as well! Sir Gerald will be overjoyed.”

Unlike last time, I was surrounded by a whole bunch of knights. The two commanders of the Soleil Knights—Ortho and Stora—were there, along with their subordinates. Some of the North Cardinal Knights joined the conversation as well, and their demeanors were surprisingly friendly.

“Your spell... It caught the whole group of monsters in one sweep! What was it?”

“I’ve never seen a water giant so large that it touches the clouds!”

“Uhh...” I murmured. I might’ve cast it, but I could barely remember how I’d done so.

“Still,” a knight interjected, “where did *five thousand* ancient monsters come from...?”

Another knight replied, wearing a grim expression. “It’s obvious—the only place that contains so many survivors from a thousand years ago.”

“The northern continent...”

If my memory served, the northern continent was also called the demon continent, and it was indeed ruled by demons.

“Most likely. And the monsters on that continent obey Zagan, the King of Beasts.”

“Demon Lord Zagan...” a knight mused. “One of the three demon lords of the northern continent.”

“The monsters on that continent have never left its shores without an order from the King of Beasts...”

“Does that mean he is allied with the Snake Sect?”

“It seems likely that there is at least some form of agreement in place.”

“A bother indeed...”

“Their alliance could even interfere with the Northern Front Plan.”

The military men all wore hard looks as they spoke. During a lull in the conversation, I stepped away from all the knights and went to the banquet table, hoping to snag something to eat. Highland’s cuisine was superb.

As I walked to the table, a blonde knight called out to me. “A-A-Ah! Thank you so much for earlier!”

This is Gerald’s little sister, right? Janet Ballantine...

What did she mean by “earlier”? Was she talking about when the red dragon attacked her? Before I could ask for clarification, she’d run off somewhere, but she was instantly replaced by several other people I didn’t know.

“Good day, Hero of Roses. I am Sandra of house Roland.”

“I am glad to meet you, Hero. Could we talk over there?” asked another noblewoman.

“Hero? Could I hear of your exploits? We can spend some time in my room after the party...”

These noblewomen all really wanted to talk to me... *But I'm shy! I just can't handle speaking with so many unfamiliar people...*

Suddenly, my *Listen* skill picked up a distant conversation.

"What's happening?"

"Takatsuki's all over them."

"This is infuriating."

Those voices definitely belonged to Lucy, Sasa, and Princess Sophia. Furiae was absent, but I'd expected that—I'd actually asked if she wanted to attend the party, but she'd flat-out refused. "Never," she'd spat. "But...give my regards to Ryouzuke."

I turned my attention back to the elegant noblewomen and found myself floundering in the face of their advances. But then, someone broke through the wall of people.

"Hero Makoto, I wish to thank you for your contribution to our victory." Princess Noelle stepped toward me wearing a lavish dress.

Sakurai was at her side. "I heard you defeated five thousand ancient monsters all at once," he said.

"And *you* took out over a hundred blight monsters, didn't you?" I replied. "That must've been way harder." I hadn't heard about it until the end of the battle, but a huge number of blight monsters had attacked from the ocean. The Snake Sect had really pulled out all the stops...for nothing. The Hero of Light Sakurai had shoved them all right back into the sea.

"By the way, where's Furiae?" Sakurai asked.

"Not here. She did tell me to give you her regards."

"I see... Where is she now?"

"I think she's staying with Fujiyan."

"Right..." he murmured. "I'll go see her later."

"Sir Ryouzuke?" Princess Noelle interrupted. "You cannot do that. Have you forgotten your plans for later?"

“N-Noelle? But—”

“You cannot.” She wore a gentle smile, but...there was something about her voice that brooked no disagreement. It was a bit scary. The Hero of Light was gonna end up whipped.

As I was pondering Sakurai’s predicament, someone else butted into our conversation. “Hero of Roses, are you enjoying yourself?” The booming voice came from a burly guy, and he grinned broadly, clapping a hand on my shoulder. I was pretty sure this was Gaius Highland, the first prince. “What do you say? I can give you anything you want, so why not move to Highland and work for me?”

“Uh...”

What was this geezer, I mean prince on about?

“P-Please wait, Sir Gaius!” Princess Sophia interjected frantically. “He is the Hero of *Roses*!”

“Princess Sophia, his talents would best be served and showcased in a grand country like ours,” countered Gaius. “So, Hero Makoto? I can give you status, riches, women, and whatever else your heart desires. Roses cannot compete. It is not a bad deal, no?”

Princess Sophia peered at me with teary, puppy dog eyes. “Hero Makoto...what...will you do?”

“Ah...well, about that...”

Honestly, this was annoying. I wanted to decline, but I’d already turned down Highland once after Labyrinthos... *How can I say no without causing offense?*

Fortunately, Princess Noelle solved that conundrum for me. “You cannot, Gaius. Sir Makoto may well become Princess Sophia’s fiancé.”

“What?” Princess Sophia and I simultaneously uttered in shock.

“And yet, both of them seem to have only heard about this tonight...” Gaius looked distinctly unimpressed.

“Do you know of the goddess’s revelation?” asked Princess Noelle with a smooth smile. “It is said that if priestesses marry heroes from another world, it

will save this world.”

Where had that come from? I’d never heard it.

“Hmph, that would be you and the Hero of Light,” grumbled Gaius. “No matter. Hero of Roses—in due course, I shall invite you officially.”

He didn’t seem pleased about the outcome, but he walked off and let us be.

Just as I was hoping to return to more comfortable conversation, we were interrupted yet again. “Princess Noelle, Princess Sophia. Hero Makoto seems to have become the moon priestess’s guardian knight. If she rebels, then I worry for Roses’s strength.” This time, it was Highland’s prime minister. Apparently, it was his turn to gripe. “Perhaps lodgings could be arranged for the hero in Highland Castle?”

“I-I...” Princess Sophia stammered, attempting to argue against him. It seemed that Highland officials were turning up one after another, and I could more or less see where it was all going—essentially, they wanted some kind of reason to keep me here. I’d heard that Highland made a habit of collecting people that seemed capable, but this was the first time I’d experienced it for myself.

Though I wanted to support Princess Sophia, I had no idea how international relations worked... So, I just half-listened to the conversation.

Then, I felt a hand on my shoulder. Without giving me any time to react, someone barked a yell into my ear. “Elementalist! You came to the castle, and yet not to me?”

“Grandsage?” I asked.

As she smacked me on the shoulder, everyone nearby backed away. I used *Listen* to hear their muttered conversations.

“The Grandsage is here among so many people?”

“Considering how much she hates crowds, this is a rarity.”

“I have never seen her up close.”

“She is incredible...”

Oh, I guess she didn't often come to places like this.

"Hmph, so they are celebrating the battle," scoffed the Grandsage. "Rather excessive, considering its scope."

"Grandsage...thank you for your assistance today," Princess Noelle said nervously.

"I sensed the elementalist," she answered.

"Well, I was going to come see you later," I explained.

She folded her arms and sullenly surveyed the people around us. Unnervingly, she was floating in the air as she did so. "I knew it was possible that people would swarm you after your battlefield contributions..." mused the Grandsage. "Make sure that you do not get carried away. Many nobles will make their offers, but if you throw your precious virg—"

"Hey!" I protested, immediately slapping a hand over her mouth. Was she really going to bring that up in front of everyone?!

"Don't cover my mouth," she protested, her voice muffled from behind my palm. "I can't speak."

"Then don't talk about that kind of stuff!" I whisper-yelled.

"What? You should be proud of your virginity."

"How?! I won't give you blood anymore!"

"Hmm... That *would* be a problem."

Did I get through to her? That was close. Maybe since she doesn't spend a lot of time around crowds, she lost her common sense for a minute... I guess she was just that kind of person...er, vampire.

"I will be waiting for you," said the Grandsage.

"Right, right, I'll be over later."

"You had better!" With those parting words, she vanished with a teleport.

Man, what a drag. You couldn't take your eyes off her...

When I turned back to the group, I saw that everyone was staring at me.

Princess Noelle, the prime minister, various nobles, the clergy, the knights, and everyone else at the party. Even the king himself, who sat at the highest position in the banquet hall, had his mouth agape.

Uh...why?

“Takatsuki...” Sakurai began carefully. “You’re pretty close with the Grandsage, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I answered. All I did was give her blood every so often.

There were a lot fewer people that came to talk to me after that. *I wonder why...*

“Helloooo? Grandsage! Are you there?”

Since people had stopped speaking to me after my encounter with the Grandsage, I’d decided to leave the banquet and head over to her mansion. Lucy and Sasa had been talking with the knights they’d fought with—the third and fourth divisions of the Soleil Knights, along with the Southern Cardinal Knights. This had left me by myself at the party, so leaving had seemed preferable to milling about alone.

When I arrived at the Grandsage’s estate, I found her lolling on a huge sofa and looking pretty unhappy.

“You’re late! Sit here,” she commanded.

I sighed, sinking down next to her.

“Hup!” she called out as she straddled my lap, facing me.

“Wha! Uh...Grandsage?”

We were now so close, and her red eyes, pale skin, and young face moved toward me. Her cold breath wafted against my cheek.

“Come on, support my back. Don’t you have any consideration?”

“Sure, sure.”

Selfish little Grandsage... I grumbled mentally, putting my hands behind her

back. Her body felt light.

She chuckled. “Then let us begin.”

I felt her teeth latch onto my neck, and I’d honestly gotten used to the pain of it. Faintly, I could hear her soft breath. There wasn’t anything else I could do while she was drinking, so I rubbed my hand up and down her back.

She’s tiny...

But the mana contained in her small frame was incredible. She might look about ten, but she was a legendary mage that had been alive for over a millennium.

It’s hard to imagine... I thought, patting her on the head without really thinking about it.

She instantly shot up to gawk at me with an expression of shock. Her red eyes were wide open and staring.

Crap, did I do something rude? She was pretty high-ranking in Highland’s class system, right? Did I annoy her? Well...her expression didn’t *look* angry at least.

“Continue...” she murmured eventually. Her voice was almost too quiet to hear, so I didn’t catch the tail end of her sentence.

“Continue what?” I asked.

“Continue...patting my head.”

“R-Right...” Apparently, she’d liked it.

A length of time passed. She remained in my lap, I patted her head, and the whole time, she was draining my blood. *Do I charge more for this?* I thought in amusement.

She’d taken a little more than usual, and I was now feeling kinda light-headed. It was fine though—there was almost no chance that any enemies would show up here, so I could let my guard down.

That must’ve been why I didn’t notice the others entering until they were up close.

“Excuse— What?! You’re with the Grandsage?! What are you doing?!”

Sakurai yelled in shock.

“Whaaat?! No, Sophia, you mustn’t look!” Princess Noelle cried, covering the other princess’s eyes.

“Wh-What?” Princess Sophia stammered. “What’s going on, Lady Noelle?”

Uh? I felt like everyone was making wild misassumptions...

“You’ve all got some nerve,” the Grandsage scoffed, “interrupting an enjoyable meal like this.”

“A-A meal? Oh...I see,” Sakurai said.

“P-Please...don’t shock me like that,” Princess Noelle added. “I thought my heart was about to stop.”

At least those two had realized their mistake.

“Um...? What in the world happened?” asked Princess Sophia. She, on the other hand, hadn’t assumed that anything weird was going on. *The princess is so pure!*

“Hero Makoto,” she continued, not waiting for my answer. “Are you thinking something rude?”

Oops, my thoughts must have shown on my face. “Just your imagination,” I replied.

“So, why are you all here?” asked the Grandsage, still annoyed at having her meal interrupted.

“We were hoping to get your thoughts on the Northern Front Plan,” Princess Noelle stated seriously. “The Snake Sect had control of many ancient monsters today—this strongly implies that they have a link to the King of Beasts, Zagan. Much of Highland’s military thinks we should execute our plan sooner than we had originally proposed.”

In contrast to the princess’s earnest expression, the Grandsage looked almost bored. “The alliance had planned to recruit more troops for the invasion,” she remarked, “so how many do we have under our command?”

“I would say that we are up to about eighty percent of our target,” answered

Princess Noelle.

The Grandsage scoffed. “Then your proposed strategy of attacking early doesn’t bear mentioning. What good will it do to rush in unprepared?”

“But the demons might make the first move!”

“I would like to say ‘that’s just the way things go sometimes,’ but I am admittedly an amateur in strategy. If the general staff wishes to accelerate things, then I will not object.”

“You won’t...?” asked Princess Noelle.

“Do what you wish. All I will say is this—I think we should only fight when we can win.” As the Grandsage spoke, she looked almost nostalgic.

“Is that something Abel the Savior said?” wondered Princess Sophia.

“It is. He had a penchant for that sort of thing. You know, telling us to make sure everything was ready for an assured win, or to attack with ambushes for maximum impact. He might have been a hero, but he was also very cautious. Then again, that’s no surprise—he was the only real hero left by the time we fought Iblis.”

“What happened to the other heroes?” I asked.

The Grandsage gave me a meaningful look. “Dead. Killed by the demon lords and the wicked deity’s disciple.”

Guh. Damn it, Noah.

“Very well, Grandsage,” Princess Noelle said quietly. “We will continue with the original schedule.”

“Oh, are you sure?”

“We will follow the savior’s words of wisdom.”

Princess Noelle had made her decision, then. Personally, I wanted to train right up until the demon lord’s attack cutscene, so I was grateful.

“Although,” Princess Noelle continued, her tone and expression morphing, “you seem to be awfully close to the Hero of Roses, Grandsage. Sophia will scold you.”

“L-Lady Noelle?!” Princess Sophia sputtered as the conversation suddenly turned to her.

“It’s been a while, Priestess of Roses.”

“I-It has. You haven’t changed in the slightest.”

It seemed like they knew each other, and Princess Sophia looked nervous as they spoke. *I guess the Grandsage must truly be high-ranking.*

“Sophia and I studied at the same academy to become priestesses. The Grandsage was our magic teacher,” Princess Noelle explained softly. She then turned back to the Grandsage. “Incidentally, please refrain from drinking too much of his blood. You already get maidens’ blood from the church, do you not?”

“But, Noelle...half of the blood they send isn’t from a maiden at all.”

The two princesses let out simultaneous noises of shock. Sakurai and I just looked blankly at each other.

“I-Impossible... That means half the nuns at the church aren’t maidens...?”

“Inconceivable! While training, there is no way they can come into contact with a male from outside of the church!”

“Then they must be from inside the church,” remarked the Grandsage.

At that, the two princesses fell silent.

So this was one of *those* things? I guess there was a culture of sex in the church... Just what was the world coming to?

“I think I’ll head back to the inn,” I said, breaking the tense atmosphere.

“What about you, Princess Sophia?”

“Oh, you’re already leaving? You could relax here some more,” the Grandsage offered.

I don’t want to lose any more blood than I already have. I’m swaying on my feet as it is.

“Are you well?” asked Princess Sophia, seeing me stagger.

“I’m fine,” I told her with a rueful grin. “See you, Sakurai.”

“Yeah, until next time,” he answered.

I finished off by giving Princess Noelle my farewells, then left the Grandsage’s home with Princess Sophia.

Before retiring for the night, we collected Lucy and Sasa from the party. They had certainly made an impact on the banquet—Lucy had gotten drunk and blasted her fire magic, and when one of the Soleil Knights had harassed Sasa, she’d punted him out of the castle.

Great...more people I’ll need to keep an eye on.

With the girls in tow, we all headed back to the inn.

“It is good to see you, Hero of Roses, Warrior Girl.”

We’d once again been invited to the VIP room at the top of the Grand Highland Casino.

“Thank you,” I replied.

“Thanks for the invite!” Sasa cheered.

“I-It’s good to meet you. I’m Lucy...”

For some reason, we were all surrounded by the Castor family.

“Brother! Thanks for coming!” Peter exclaimed. He was as cheery and blunt as ever.

“Well, there was nothing else I needed to do,” I replied.

In truth, Highland’s bigwigs were all sorting out the chaos from the battle, so the actual soldiers—people like Sasa and I—were no longer needed. Princess Sophia was working, and Fujiyan was crazy busy as well, so they hadn’t come with us.

The eldest son, Jack, laughed cheerily. “The old man wanted to thank you directly.”

“There are a lot of beastmen in our family. If you hadn’t undone the Snake Sect’s curse...well, I’d rather not even think about it.”

The person speaking was Genoa Castor, don of the Castor family and the man

with the big scar across his face. He definitely looked scary.

“Our Princess Furiae was the one that broke the curse,” I said. “I’ll make sure she knows you’re grateful.” She’d been invited too but hadn’t come. I guess not wanting to see the mafia was a normal response...

“Brother...we heard you became the Priestess of the Moon’s guardian knight,” Peter said, face twisting.

“Guardian knight for the princess of curses...” Jack added with a similar expression.

Yeah, the position definitely didn’t have the best optics in this world.

“Stop your rudeness!” Genoa barked.

“Sorry,” said Peter. “Her name just raised my hackles since she’s supposed to be the reincarnation of the Witch of Calamity. We do owe her, though. It was a shame that she couldn’t come out today, but let her know that we would welcome her at any time.”

“I-I will...” I’d at least tell her what I could.

“Hero Makoto of Roses, does anything concern you?” asked the don. “We may not be able to do anything extreme, but we’ll pull whatever strings we can.”

“Umm...”

I wasn’t sure what to do. They didn’t seem like they had an ulterior motive, but I was wary about asking them for something. However, it’s not like I could say nothing—that might be construed as rude. I glanced toward Sasa and Lucy in their neighboring seats.

“Lady Aya, this is a rare stone I obtained in Caol Ilan.”

“Lady Lucy, this dress is the trend in Highland right now.”

“Wow, it’s so pretty.”

“It’s gorgeous!”

They were talking with some of the women from the casino’s staff. These women were showing them all sorts of things, and the girls seemed like they

were having fun.

“You may have it all,” said one of the staff members.

“What?! B-But they’re so expensive,” Sasa protested.

“Uh, what do we do, Aya?”

Sasa and Lucy both pulled back in shock when they were offered the expensive gems and dresses. I suppose the items were gifts of gratitude for breaking the curse.

Maybe we should take them up on it. I could even take something back for Furiae...

Still, the Castors... The bosses of the capital’s underground...

The mafia was known across the continent. They were socially powerful, though they possessed a different kind of influence than the princesses I knew. Thinking about that dynamic, something rose up in my mind...something that I’d been considering for a while.

Before I could overthink it, I blurted out, “Can I ask for something?”

Everyone was silent. The orphans stood stock-still alongside the nun who ran the church in the slums—all of their mouths hung agape in shock.

“Hey there, I’m Peter from the Castor family!” he exclaimed. “We’re Brothers now!”

“U-Uh... Makoto, what in the...” the nun tried to ask, looking between Peter and me.

“Sorry to show up out of nowhere. The Castor family is here to offer help if you need it,” I explained. “Though, maybe I shouldn’t have interfered...”

The church was a gathering of weak people in the slums. I’d asked the Castors to include the area in their territory and look after it. As a safeguard, I’d also gotten them to promise not to recruit the orphans into the mafia.

“Thank you, Hero,” said the nun after a long pause.

“When I found out that this is where Jean and Emily grew up, I couldn’t just

do nothing. I hope this helps, even if it's not enough."

"It's more than enough. The demon blood that flows through these children's veins condemns them to a life of discrimination already. And living in this dangerous area, I've always worried that many of them will grow up to hate the world. This safety net will help. Truly, thank you." Her eyes were swimming with tears.

Phew, I was glad I hadn't overstepped.

One of the orphans turned to me and said, "Thank you, big bro!"

"I'm going to be a hero too!"

"Don't be an idiot," said another orphan. "Commoners like us don't get hero-level skills or stats."

"Right, I only have stuff like *Fighter (Mid Rank)* and *Earth Magic (Low Rank)*..."

"I've got *Fire Magic (Mid Rank)*. If I became an adventurer, I'm not even sure I could make it to iron rank..."

What? Seriously, what were they on about? They had super strong skills.

"Come on, you lot," I said, beckoning the kids. "Take a look at my Soul Book and be amazed."

I opened it to show them...

And the whole crowd let out a yell in unison.

"What're these stats?!"

"They're weaker than mine!"

"M-Magic: 4?"

"He's a mage *apprentice*!"

"N-No way!"

"His only magic skill is *Water Magic (Low Rank)*..."

"No combat skills...?"

"Bro, are you really a hero?"

W-Wow... Their expressions had gone from Shock → Sympathy → Doubt. Their reactions reminded me of being back at the Water Temple!

“Listen up,” Peter boomed. “My Brother here beat the Hero of Lightning Gerald in a one-on-one fight, then he drove off five thousand ancient monsters with a single spell. He’s the real deal!”

“Whoa, you’re amazing!” all the orphans shouted.

Aaand now they were all looking envious again. Phew.

“Well, the point is that I became a hero with these stats and skills. So I think you’ll all be fine,” I told them.

“G-Got it! I can do it!”

“I’ll try too!”

“I’ll train and become a hero!”

Great, they were all happy again.

“Makoto...I’m not sure they should think of you as the standard...” Lucy whispered into my ear. Sasa nodded at her side.

“Really?” I asked.

“Everyone, the Hero of Roses here is a weirdo! When he’s not sleeping, he spends every single moment training,” Sasa told the kids.

“R-Really?”

“The whole time he’s awake?”

“Come on, Sasa, don’t misrepresent me,” I interjected immediately. I didn’t want the kids to get the wrong idea.

“G-Good,” one of the kids murmured, sighing heavily. “That would be too mu—”

“I train when I’m asleep too.”

There was a flat “what?” from everyone around us.

“Makoto... While you’re asleep?” Lucy asked.

“Takatsuki you’re such a...” Sasa shook her head. “Well, I already knew.”

The girls were now looking at me strangely too.

Whyyy? It wasn't that weird—I usually just set *Calm Mind* to 99%, cast *Waterball* above my head, and then went to sleep. If I lost control of my magic while I was passed out, the water would fall on my head and wake me up. I thought it was a great idea; it added a bit of tension and let me train while I slept.

They let me explain all that, but then...

"See, Makoto's a weirdo," Lucy confirmed, "so you can all just go at your own pace."

"Riiight!" they chorused.

Well, in the end, they'd decided I was strange. I guess they wouldn't see it my way. Oh well. Sasa wanted to spend the day playing with the kids, so the rest of us took our leave.

Three days had passed since the end of the chaos.

"Princess Sophia, Prince Leonardo. We will be returning to Macallan soon," I said.

"What?! Already?" Prince Leonardo exclaimed. "All of the nobles want to meet you though."

They did. Rumors had spread about my relationship with the Grandsage; some just said that we got along well, and others...added sweeteners. But what good would *that* do for me?

"It would be a good opportunity to make connections. You just don't have the desire for it, do you?" Princess Sophia said with a reluctant smile.

"I'm just bad at talking to people I don't know," I explained.

"You're still so shy," Sasa observed.

"And yet," Lucy added, "you're A-okay with charging at strong monsters."

"You can't compare those," I protested. "Monsters don't talk."

Sasa and Lucy said nothing else, just exchanged weighted looks and gave sighs

of defeat. What was that all about?

Regardless, I'd told my friends from Roses about my plan to return to Macallan, so now I just needed to let the Highland officials know. But just as I set off to do that, I received a summons from Princess Noelle.

◇ Musings of Noelle Althena Highland ◇

I know. For as long as I can remember, I have known. I was raised to be the reincarnation of the holy mother, and my role is to support the savior who represents the world's hope.

Though it seemed like a distant recollection, I remembered when Gerald, with his Hero of Lightning skill, had once been called the savior.

"I'll defeat the Great Demon Lord!" he declared. Gerald trained with his sword every day, and I watched from the sidelines, learning the skills I would need as a priestess.

Yet as I grew, so did my uneasiness.

According to the legends, Anna the Holy Mother could heal thousands of people in an instant. Her song could give a simple soldier the strength of a thousand men. In her lifetime, she had caused many miracles.

I was far from capable of that.

It wasn't just me... The Hero of Lightning began to plateau as well. He was considered to be the best swordsman on the continent, but Great Keith's Olga—the Hero of Incandescence—often fought him to a draw. In ranked matches, they were always neck and neck. After a time, people began to ask questions: was this all that the savior's reincarnation could manage?

Gradually, Gerald's personality grew harsher and harsher.

Monsters were also growing more active by the day. Since the goddesses had offered the revelation that the Great Demon Lord would return before 1010 AS, people steadily became more uneasy.

Otherworld heroes will save us all.

Priestesses from all six nations received this revelation simultaneously. This kicked off a frenzied search across the continent for otherworlders. And when Highland heard about the Hero of Light being at the Water Temple, it used its influence to claim him.

“He is the Hero of Light, Ryousuke Sakurai. Noelle, you will become his fiancée and support him. This is my order as king.”

“What?”

That command had come from out of nowhere and had instantly annulled my engagement to Gerald. I was betrothed anew, this time, to the Hero of Light.

This also changed my position in the order of succession. I had been third in line to the throne, and now...I was first. I would be the next monarch of Highland.

The purpose of all this was to create blood ties between the Hero of Light and the royal family of Highland. None of it was of my own will. As a princess, it was my duty to follow this path. I just silently accepted it.

The Hero of Light, Sir Ryousuke Sakurai...he is a handsome man...

That was my first thought when I glimpsed him from a distance. He seemed like an agreeable young man with an easygoing disposition. However, even Highland’s leaders had been oddly cautious of inviting his ire.

“I can only assume that this all comes as a sudden shock to you,” the prime minister told him, oddly deferent. “However, Highland will support you with all of its strength.”

Our nation could not afford to offend the Hero of Light.

“It’s okay,” Sir Ryousuke responded. “This is the role I have been given. Just, my classmates...”

“You can rely on us for that.”

In exchange for joining us, the Hero of Light only wanted one thing—Highland needed to ensure that his otherworld comrades were kept safe. His friends

relied upon him, and our nation would try its best to meet that condition.

The hero was also given more women, fiancées besides myself. As a priestess, I could not bear his child. However, there was a chance that he would lose his life in the upcoming war with the Great Demon Lord, so the other girls were to defend the savior's bloodline against the possibility of extermination.

Though he and I barely knew one another, we could not be antagonistic, so we were required to have weekly meetings. That was no real burden—he was personable and a good conversationalist. At the time, though, I had no real feelings for him. Our interactions were merely a matter of duty.

However, I held two powerful positions in society: I was both a cardinal in the goddess's church and the first in line to Highland's throne. Fulfilling the duties of those roles was more exhausting than I had ever imagined, so I started to resent the meetings with Sir Ryoustake. Considering his own lofty position as the world's savior, I could only imagine that he felt the same way.

In his old world, he had never even held a sword, but he was now being trained personally by the commander in chief of the army, Lord Owain. He started at dawn, polishing his skills in both swordplay and magic. At night, he learned strategy and how to lead an army. All of these lessons must have been significant burdens on him, and eventually, I thought that we should stop our pointless meetings. I even decided to consult the prime minister on it.

But one day, I became so engrossed in my work that I forgot to meet Sir Ryoustake. I had even overlooked the schedule an attendant had written for me. By the time I noticed, it was already late into the night.

He can't still be there... I thought. I decided that I would apologize the day after, but on a whim, I checked our meeting place on the off chance he would be there.

"What?"

Despite the late hour, Sir Ryoustake was still waiting. He must have been exhausted because he was nodding off.

"Sir Ryoustake?! You did not need to wait for me until such an hour. Surely you have an early morning tomorrow?"

“Oh, Princess Noelle, are you done with your work?” He asked this with a wide smile as if he didn’t care about the hour.

I got angry.

These meetings were pointless. He shouldn’t have pushed himself so hard just to meet me.

“Sir Ryousuke, you are the most important person in Highland. You should not push yourself so far that you—”

“It’s not too far,” he insisted.

“Why are you here, then?”

“I wanted to hear more about your work in the church.”

“You want to hear...about that?” I asked, completely confused.

During our last meeting, I had touched on some things that I was personally carrying out—plans to ease the discrimination in Highland. These new policies had many opponents among the royalty and nobility. Honestly, I had been starting to think that I could not do it alone, and I’d just been complaining. He had listened to me with a smile, though I can’t imagine the topic was particularly enjoyable.

“I do want to hear it,” he answered. “When you spoke about those issues, it felt like, for the first time, I was hearing how you really felt. It made me happy.”

I let out a startled gasp as my heart fluttered. One of my skills was called *Peerless Beauty*, and it gave everyone I met a good first impression of me. My skill allowed me to carry out successful meetings with anyone, even if it was the first time I’d met them.

Even so, I had never truly *connected* with anyone.

If I had to say...I probably felt closest with Princess Sophia of Roses. After all, we had similar positions. However, for the first time, someone other than the Grandsage had pointed out that I was obscuring how I really felt.

“I thought we’d finally gotten a little closer,” he admitted, “so I didn’t want to miss today.”

His words made me pause for a moment. “You are a strange person.”

“Still,” he said, “it *is* late tonight. Let’s have a proper chat the next time we can.” Indeed, we didn’t talk much that night.

But...

I want to speak more with him...

He had now piqued my interest. After that night, I stopped using *Peerless Beauty* around him and chose to speak honestly. I admitted my dislike of Highland’s strict classist nature and the rampant interracial discrimination. I talked about the power struggles of the church, royalty, and nobility. Sir Ryousuke listened to all my complaints with a smile.

And before I knew it, I had someone I could speak openly with. The weekly meetings were now anxiously awaited, and...I had feelings for him.

There was just one issue with that though—he had many fiancées. Several of them had already borne him children. I was jealous.

Calm down, Noelle, I willed myself. I activated *Serenity*, which was a skill I’d learned as part of my church training. *I am his first fiancée. I should be confident.*

“My fiancées...they all want to improve their families’ standings, or rank higher in society,” Sir Ryousuke told me awkwardly. That was shameful—those women already had his children.

As time went on, I got to hear more and more of his worries, and we could speak more frankly with each other.

At least, until that day...

A command came down from Highland’s leaders—Sir Ryousuke was to capture the Priestess of the Moon from Laphroaig.

It was a plan that the pope had proposed to ease people’s worries. The priestess’s *Charm* skill could not be fought against, not by anyone. Paranoid rumors circulated, and people believed that if she put her mind to it, she would be able to restore Laphroaig. The pope’s plan was to nip that concern in the

bud.

A force of the Soleil Knights and Temple Knights carried out the orders. The Hero of Light, Ryousuke, had the leading role because of his immunity to debuffs.

The mission went off without a hitch, but when he returned, Sir Ryousuke was...much less spirited.

“Princess Noelle...I saw her people,” he stated. “They were doing their best to eke out a living. Was...there any point? Any reason why we had to kill them just for protecting their priestess...?”

“I...”

“Furiae let us have it...” he continued. “She called us pillagers. Told us that her people just wanted to live peacefully...”

“I...”

The military reports said that her people had all been charmed into protecting her...but they had committed no real crime. And yet, other than the priestess herself, whose curse meant she could not be killed, every one of them had been eliminated. The pope had given the order; the Temple Knights had done it. Exterminating the people of Laphroaig had been a choice made by Highland.

I knew that Sir Ryousuke did not agree with that tactic...and I thought he might have started to lose faith in our country.

He started to visit the priestess.

“Did you...see her again?”

“I did. I’ve only heard Highland’s side so far, so I need to understand the perspectives of people outside this country.”

He was right, but I was nervous. I would never go to visit her—she could use *Charm* with a glance. Had *he* been charmed? I was anxious about it all.

So, I made a plan. I sent him away to defeat the blight dragons that had appeared in Labyrinthos. Roses’s request for aid was an answer to my problems.

I went with him to another country, figuring that it would be a change of pace. When we left Highland, his expression was dark.

But that changed right after we arrived in Labyrinth Town.

“Saki!” he yelled to another of his fiancées, Saki Yokoyama. “I saw Takatsuki!”

“Um, you mean our classmate?” she asked. It was the first time I’d seen a bright expression on his face in quite some time.

“Did something pleasant happen?” I asked.

“I got to meet my childhood friend again!” he cheered. “I knew that he stayed in the Water Temple for the whole year, but I was worried because I hadn’t heard from him. What a relief...”

I’d never seen him so happy. Curious, I investigated.

“Makoto Takatsuki...an iron rank adventurer.”

He was an otherworlder and an adventurer in the rural town of Macallan. He had increased his rank quickly, but that was nothing special for a warrior from another world. I just filed that information away in a corner of my mind.

The next time I heard of him was after the blight dragons had been defeated.

“He used king rank magic to drag both of them out?” I asked.

“Yup! That’s our Takatsuki!” Sir Ryousuke gushed. “I should have gotten him to help from the start.”

The reports had said that he was a mage apprentice. That meant he should not be able to use king rank magic...but all the knights had witnessed it.

“Maybe I should meet him...” I mused.

I had the skill *Insight*. While it was not on the same level as the legendary *Mind Reading* skill, I was confident that it could help me make a judgment about someone. And if he was capable, I wanted him for Highland.

Besides, he got along with Sir Ryousuke, and the more people supporting the Hero of Light, the better.

“Makoto Takatsuki...” I murmured.

My first impression of him was bland—he seemed like a completely ordinary teenager. He was a skilled mage but didn't appear to be a strong combatant. I got the impression that he was a good person, if not exceptionally reliable.

In short, he was average—the type of person you could see anywhere.

That was the conclusion I drew with *Insight*. But, my gut intuition felt differently.

He's... I'm not sure, but there is something about him. I didn't know what it was, but I could not press an invite to Highland too strongly in front of Princess Sophia.

He decided to remain in Roses.

I wasn't about to give up though, so I extended an invite to Highland. It would be an opportunity to recognize his aid in defeating the blight dragons and also to speak with him in more depth.

That had been my plan, but it had soon gone awry.

“What? Makoto Takatsuki is a State-Authorized Hero of Roses?” I was shocked. It had not been very long since he had returned from the dungeon. And at that time, he and Sophia hadn't seemed like they were on good terms...

What in the world had happened?

He did come to Highland though. And immediately, he found himself in a skirmish with Gerald, the Hero of Lightning.

He won...

Throughout the castle, rumors ran wild concerning Roses's new hero. I was curious, so I asked Sophia.

“What...you want to hear about Hero Makoto? He is *our* hero, Lady Noelle!”

Her attitude toward him had seemingly undergone a complete reversal since the dungeon.

“I-I know. Do not worry—I will not take him for Highland.”

“You had better not!”

What a change, considering that Sophia was said to be “carved from ice.” Every time she spoke about him, her eyes began to sparkle. I didn’t need my *Insight (Ultra Rank)* to figure it out. She was a maiden in love...

I remembered when she and I had studied together at the academy. She had told me that she would dedicate herself to Roses and never get married, so this lovestruck attitude was a significant departure for her. I didn’t know what I *could* do, but I wanted to support her from the shadows—I wanted to see her love come to fruition.

The Hero of Light idolized him, *and* he had stolen Sophia’s heart. There had to be something to this Makoto Takatsuki.

The next time he appeared, I was shocked.

“Th-The guardian knight of the Priestess of the Moon?! What are you thinking, Sir Makoto?! Princess Sophia is with you as well.”

The group from Roses had suddenly appeared one night. And...they had that cursed priestess with them. The conversation that followed was even more of a shock: the beastmen of the city had been cursed for over ten years by the Snake Sect, and that curse would activate tomorrow in the form of a rebellion.

B-But... The Great Demon Lord is yet to return. Symphonia cannot fall...

My eyes dimmed with despair.

But then the Hero of Roses spoke up, his tone easy. “So I had this idea.”

His plan was to use the Priestess of the Moon’s curse removal powers, transmitted through rainwater.

“And that pretty much explains it,” he finished. “Grandsage, can you please help with controlling the weather?”

“That is quite the tall order,” the Grandsage replied. “It will cost you.”

“I can pay in blood, right?”

Thus, the contract was sealed—the Grandsage would perform the difficult task of controlling the weather.

Using this plan, we managed to quell the rebellion facing Symphonia. Then, we defended against the Snake Sect's attack and drove off the swarm of ancient monsters. By now, no one in Highland Castle was unaware of Makoto Takatsuki's achievements. Yet, according to Princess Sophia, he didn't seem to appreciate the enormity of them...

No matter what...I had to speak with him.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

Behind a door on the highest level of Highland Castle, protected by golden knights, was Princess Noelle's meeting room.

"Excuse me..." I called out softly as I stepped inside.

Princess Noelle was within, backlit by a huge window. She was glowing like a painting.

"Thank you for coming, Hero Makoto," she said. "I have heard that you will soon be returning to Roses. I want you to know that you can relax here in Symphonia for as long as you wish."

"I can't really seem to calm down here... New people keep visiting me every day," I explained.

"I see. Sir Ryousuke was quite upset to hear of your departure."

"Ah..."

That reminded me... I hadn't spoken with him since right after the battle. He was always busy, so I'd held back and had missed out on seeing him.

"Let us speak a little about your future," pressed Princess Noelle.

And so, we talked, covering a myriad of topics:

- The Northern Front Plan and how best to proceed
- Scheduling regular meetings that included the heroes of the six allied nations
- Enacting a cross-national support network for when blight monsters and other strong beasts appeared
- How the Snake Sect was not accepted by any country

This discussion was completely normal, and I wasn't sure what warranted a formal and direct invite to her meeting room.

"Allow me to digress for a moment," the princess finally said, her expression changing. While she'd been all business up to this point, she now looked a bit teasing. "What do you think of Sophia?"

I couldn't help the noise of confusion that escaped from my mouth. "I'm grateful she made me a hero," I eventually answered, hedging my bets. But apparently, that wasn't the response she was looking for.

"What do you think of Sophia as a woman?" she clarified.

"Uh..."

Where had this come from? As I hesitated, Princess Noelle sighed and then smiled.

"You are the Priestess of the Moon's guardian knight, are you not? Were you charmed into it?"

"You don't need to worry about that," I assured her. "Charm magic doesn't work on me at all." Even Noah had admitted it. I now knew that it was a hidden effect from my *RPG Player* skill.

"I honestly find that hard to believe... But it *is* a relief. Please, continue to aid Sophia."

"I will. After all, I like Roses." None of that was a lie. Was that the answer Princess Noelle wanted to hear, though?

She made a show of thinking, then opened her mouth again. "Incidentally, I have heard a somewhat...concerning rumor," she said, peering at me.

"What rumor?" I asked after a moment of wondering. Was it about me?

After another pause, she spoke again. "That the Hero of Roses is the Grandsage's lover."

"Huh?" What did she just say?

"The Highland nobles...seem to think that you are the Grandsage's lover."

"Where did that come from?!" I demanded. That was even worse than my old

Goblin Cleaner nickname!

“They inferred it from your conversation with the Grandsage at the party,” she explained.

Wait, that? Barely anything happened, though.

“So,” she continued, “what is the truth?”

“I’m not!” I exclaimed.

Her face sharpened again slightly. “Allow me to explain the Grandsage’s position in Highland.”

“She’s like the third most important, right?” Fujiyan had explained that to me.

“Publicly, yes,” Princess Noelle confirmed. “But listen, this country places Abel the Savior’s companions on the same level as the gods. After all, Highland *was* formed by him. The pope inherits Anna the Holy Mother’s position. And the Grandsage...is the descendant of the legendary mage.”

“Well, she actually *is* the mage, but yeah.”

The princess nodded. “Indeed... In other words, the Grandsage is akin to a god.”

I had no response.

“His Majesty...my father, cannot gainsay the pope or the Grandsage. The Grandsage is not particularly interested in influence, so her title might be in name only, but she has the highest influence of all.”

“R-Right...I see...” The Grandsage had started teaching Lucy magic, so I’d gotten on pretty friendly terms with her. Maybe I shouldn’t have...

“You hadn’t realized at all.” Princess Noelle sighed. “Sophia was right.”

“What did Princess Sophia say?”

“That you were unconcerned with the things you had done.”

“What things—” I’d paused for a moment before speaking, only to be cut on by Noah’s voice in my mind.

It’s true.

Noah? I thought back.

Reflect on your density, she demanded.

Aww, but I've always played it carefully.

You're a careful player before you clear something...but afterward, you really aren't.

Was I not? I guess I *didn't* worry too much about what came after clearing a dungeon or fighting a great battle...

"Sir Makoto?" The princess was peering into my face. She was a bit too close.

"Thank you for the information. I'll be careful."

"Very well. Please continue to be friendly with Sophia as well."

"I-I will."

So she was a Princess Sophia stan, then? She'd also mentioned that, if I had the time, Sakurai wanted to see me. *She really loves him*, I mused.

Once we'd finished, I thanked her for the meeting, then left.

At least I hadn't let anything slip about Noah...phew.

"Makoto, what happened with Princess Noelle?" Lucy asked when I returned to the castle entrance.

"Let's go get food," Sasa cheered.

"You're late, my knight," Furiae interjected.

The three of them were waiting at the entrance for me. Furiae was wearing a hooded robe to hide her face.

"Sorry to keep you," I said. "Let's head back to the inn."

A whole lot had happened...but we'd done all we could in Highland. All I wanted was to go home—to Macallan.

Epilogue: Under the Millennium Cherry Trees

When she heard we were leaving, the Grandsage called for us as well.

“This is quite the view, is it not, Elementalist?” she asked.

“It’s wonderful,” I agreed.

She’d brought us to a garden on the outskirts of the capital.

“Wow!”

“So pretty! The whole place is blooming!”

“I didn’t know Symphonia had someplace like this.”

Lucy, Sasa, and Furiae seemed impressed too. The area was filled with cherry trees, all blooming well out of season.

“This...”

“So they have cherry trees in this world as well.”

Sakurai and Yokoyama were awed as well. So was I, actually.

“What is this place?” I asked the Grandsage.

“The Millennium Cherry Tree Gardens. Abel and Johnnie planted it together after they drove back a million of the demon lord’s army. This garden was where our party took an oath to defeat the Great Demon Lord.”

Oh, I’d heard of that...this place was always included in the retelling of Abel the Savior’s myth.

“This spot is usually seen as holy ground that no one can enter...but at times like these, I think it’s fine.” The Grandsage’s eyes flicked toward a huge feast of food and drink atop a massive wooden table.

Lucy and Sasa both cheered as they took their seats, while Furiae and I moved much more calmly to our own.

As I examined the table, I noticed something. “This was made with *Wood*

Magic,” I commented. “And it’s pretty old. Over a hundred years...no...*well* over that, right?”

“So you realized?” the Grandsage commented. “Johnnie made this table to celebrate our victory.”

“What?!” Lucy yelled. “Great-grandpa made this?!” She looked shocked. So this was something her great-grandfather—Johnnie Walker—had made. It was hardly a surprise that the table had stood for so long.

“I’m still impressed that it’s been around for a thousand years,” I said. “Even if it *is* a bit weather-beaten.”

“He called on the elementals to protect it. Not that I can see them.”

I examined the table closer. She was right—water elementals were floating around the wood. There were probably earth elementals and wind elementals as well, though I couldn’t see them. A whole millennium...that was incredible. Johnnie Walker really lived up to his legend.

“Everyone, the preparations are complete,” Princess Noelle announced with a smile. I’d thought that she didn’t need to organize this meal herself...but it looked like she was enjoying herself.

“Sit down here, Ryousuke,” she said, gesturing next to her and letting Yokoyama sit on his other side. So he was sandwiched between two wives... Why’s it always like this with him? He could keel over any minute, and I wouldn’t mind.

“Get me that sparkling wine, my knight,” Furiae commanded. She, on the other hand, didn’t seem to be in a good mood. She must’ve wanted to speak with Sakurai, but that wasn’t going to happen now.

“Here, Princess,” I said, doing as I was told and pouring the wine into a glass.

“You drink too.”

The drink she poured for me was a particularly strong one. I wasn’t exactly a heavyweight when it came to drinking...but she’d already started, so I joined her. Having the spirit “on the rocks” was tough, though. *Maybe I should water it down...*

“Hmph, we need to get out of this country,” Furiae grumbled. The sight of her face in profile was no less beautiful than the cherry blossoms. She really was the most beautiful human I’d ever seen...

Just then, I felt a tug at my sleeve.

“Ah...Hero Makoto?”

I turned to see that Princess Sophia was next to me.

“Good work out there,” I told her. “We had a lot to deal with.”

“Indeed we did.”

Things had looked pretty dicey for a while there... It would have been much easier to win if Princess Sophia had been by my side, like during the battle in Horn. Without really thinking, I took her hand.

“U-Umm...what is it?”

“It would have been better if I’d used *Synchro* with you...”

I touched her slender fingers, one by one.

“A-Ah? Um... Hero Makoto?”

She was cute when she was flustered like this. I downed the rest of the fire in my glass.

“Are you drunk?” I heard an exasperated voice from behind me.

“I’m not,” I answered, turning my spinning head toward Furiae. She was snacking on fruit as she drank her wine. The stuff on her fork looked kinda like grapes.

“Give me a bite,” I said.

She grumbled and didn’t look happy, but brought the fork to my mouth.

I bit into the fruit and sweetness filled my mouth as my teeth broke through the crisp outer layer. Wow, it tasted great.

“Here,” she said, bringing another mouthful up.

Was she feeding me...? Like in an anime?

“H-Hero Makoto,” stammered Princess Sophia. “I will feed you.” Frantically,

she held a different fruit up to my mouth. Yeah...this one was great too.

“Have another drink,” Furiae insisted.

Quit pouring me spirits, Furiae. I swayed drunkenly, glancing around.

The party was in full swing. Sakurai was making merry with some of his coworkers—the Soleil Knights. To the people from this world, it seemed like visiting places connected to Abel the Savior was a significant honor. Everyone was in a good mood after defeating the Snake Sect and their monsters. Princess Sophia had fed me, and Furiae had poured me drinks, so after being entertained by two beauties, I was also in high spirits.

Although...I had a feeling that Lucy and Sasa were glaring this way.

I think I might've had too much... I thought. But that was because Furiae had only poured me *strong* drinks.

I decided to stand up and go look at the flowers. The whole area looked like it was blanketed in pale pink petals from the cherry trees. I trudged through the blizzard of blossoms, not really having a destination in mind. When I'd walked far enough, I could no longer hear the party.

The petals kept silently dancing through the air.

“What’s wrong?” someone suddenly asked from behind. “On your own?”

“Grandsage?”

She'd been drinking brandy (well, blood that looked like brandy) at the banquet, but apparently, she'd slipped away as well.

“I’ve had too much to drink, so I’m taking a break,” I explained.

“Hmm, I see,” she answered disinterestedly. Still, she didn’t leave. She just watched the flowers next to me.

Should I say something...?

My lack of communication skills meant that I couldn’t think of anything witty, but this was a rare chance.

“What was Abel the Savior like as a person?” I asked.

It was something I'd been curious about. I knew he was legendary, but the

Grandsage had actually been in his party a thousand years ago. I wouldn't really get another chance to ask someone so connected.

"Abel...he was a weird one."

That was far from the answer I was expecting.

"He was...weird?" The lessons at the temple had depicted him as being practically a saint.

"I know," said the Grandsage. "Since we're here, I'll take you somewhere nice."

I yelped as a cold hand tugged me along.

Teleport.

The area around us warped, and when I opened my eyes again, we were in a village in the countryside.

"This is Nikka, the village Abel once lived in."

That was a shock. She'd dragged me along in a *Teleport*.

"Oh...it is?" I glanced around. This was another famous place—the place of Abel the Savior's birth.

When I looked up, I saw a white statue atop a small hill. It was probably one of Abel, like in the capital. It was closer to life-size than the one in Symphonia though. I walked up to it...and felt something out of place.

"He was pretty short."

The legends described him as a burly swordsman, and the statue in Symphonia indeed depicted a gallant swordsman. This person looked much more like a dainty boy, though.

"This one's closer to the real thing," the Grandsage commented. "The one in the capital is exaggerated too much."

"I-I see..."

I peered up at the statue again. He had soft, almost feminine facial features. So *he* was the one who'd defeated the Great Demon Lord and saved the world...

After thinking over this, I examined the village. It was a quiet place. There were several stalls set up, so I checked to see what they were selling.

Steamed Savior Buns. Sir Abel's Sword (Replica). And...Statue of the Savior (1/16th scale).

What on earth?

"Anything you want?" asked the Grandsage, peering out from behind me. Would she buy it? Let's have a look at the price...

"What the?!" A box of buns was ten thousand gald?! That was a rip-off!

"The village has no local specialties, so they make their money by selling things related to Abel the Savior."

"There's nothing I really want..." I mumbled after a moment.

I wouldn't buy any of this stuff myself, and the prices were too high for me to ask someone else to buy these trinkets for me. So, the two of us just wandered around the village for a while.

"Did the savior come back here after he defeated the Great Demon Lord?" I asked.

"No, he didn't. After the battle, he disappeared somewhere."

"And afterward...no one saw him again?" That was the history I'd learned at the Water Temple—the savior of the world had just suddenly vanished.

"Do you know anything more?" I asked.

"Who knows."

She didn't deny it. Hmm, I guess the details were a secret.

"If you want to hear about back then, then how about this?" she suggested with a grin. "I can tell you about the blighted black knight that was the Wicked Deity Noah's disciple."

Guh?! The Mad Hero Cain—otherwise known as the Taboo Black Knight—was Abel the Savior's archenemy in the legends.

He'd also been Noah's disciple...and my predecessor.

“W-Well...what kind of person was he?”

Noah hadn't actually given me the details.

“You haven't heard from the wicked deity?”

“I haven't asked.”

I'd tell you, y'know, Noah mentally informed me. Want to hear it?

Hmm, your ex... I kinda want to know, but I also don't...

Don't call him my ex!

“So you don't know about that Demon Lord? He was the worst of them. You don't know how many times he betrayed us?!” The Grandsage went through it all, her voice filled with irritation: about how he'd killed many of his fellow heroes...and about how he'd suddenly leaped into an important battle wearing ridiculous armor that had turned away spell and blade alike.

Noah...I want that armor.

I don't have the materials anymore...I used them all up back then! ☆

I saw a mental image of Noah giving a dopey giggle. Looks like I got my hopes up!

“He must have been difficult to defeat.” The legends all painted him as ridiculously overpowered. How had they done it?

As she spoke, the Grandsage's expression softened. “It was all...thanks to Abel.”

Did she...have feelings for the savior? I wondered.

If he'd been as saintly as the legends said, then he must have also been fairly charming. Plus, he'd saved her life... She must be at least somewhat fond of him.

He had vanished, though.

Her not wanting to talk about it might have to do with some unrequited love...
As that thought went through my head, I decided that it'd be rude to pry further, so I stopped.

Abel the Savior's village wasn't treated as the "holy ground" I'd expected. Instead, it was a full-on tourist trap. I still had a good time though.

After we'd seen our fill, the Grandsage and I headed back to the capital.

"My esteemed Tackie! Where have you been?"

"Takatsuki, I was looking for you!"

Two people called out to me after not too long—Fujiyan and Sakurai. Sakurai apparently wanted to hear about both of our adventures in Roses.

"Well, if I muuuust," I answered, before beginning some stories laced with just a *touch* of embellishment.

After that, the three of us ended up getting enthralled in a conversation about our old world. It was pretty fun. Before I knew it, though, we were surrounded by people.

Princess Noelle had opened the garden in celebration of our victory. Unfortunately, noble girls had poured in looking to greet me. Honestly, some of them were even more blatant than I was used to.

Maybe I should get back to Lucy and Sasa, I thought.

I looked around and then spotted them with Nina and Chris, talking about something.

I wondered what their conversation was about. Despite it being in poor taste...

Listen.

"Miss Lucy, Miss Sasaki, this is bad'h! The noblewomen are after Mister Takatsuki'h!"

"Takatsuki's shy, though..." said Sasa.

"That's right. He doesn't have the guts to do anything. It's not like he's done anything with us either."

Watch it, Lucy! Even the mildest lamb can become a wolf!

So will you? snarked Noah.

Nope. Forget about that.

I turned my attention back to their conversation.

“That’s naive,” Chris commented. “Nobles have no scruples. Even I placed many traps to take Sir Michio for myself...”

That...was a scary thing to hear from her. No scruples indeed.

“Though, he saw through them all’h,” Nina added. “And now, since Chris and I don’t need to fight anymore, you can both have this’h.”

Nina passed a small bottle to Sasa.

“What is it?”

Chris chuckled, whispering something into the other pair’s ears about...an effect it had? I was far away, so even my skill couldn’t pick up the soft words properly. I was worried about it, but some noble girls were striking up some conversation again, so I didn’t hear any of the rest.

I hung out on the edges of the party for a while, drinking and watching the flowers drift.

“Hey, Makoto, come with us.”

“Let’s chat, Takatsuki.”

Lucy and Sasa had turned up.

“Sure, but where are we going?”

“This way, this way.”

“Hurry up.”

The two of them dragged me farther into the gardens, away from everyone. I had no idea where they’d gotten it from, but there was a picnic blanket spread out on the ground among the billowing cherry blossoms. Sasa poured wine while Lucy put out some snacks.

It was like a little hideaway. We were far enough away from the party that the noise wasn’t audible anymore.

“A toast, then,” Sasa suggested.

“Here you go, take a glass.”

The two of them smiled innocently as I took the glass...

But I saw it happen.

I saw Sasa sneakily pour the liquid from that small bottle into my drink. I doubted it was poison, but... What on earth *was* it? I was worried, so I decided turnabout's fair play.

“Oh? It's the Grandsage,” I called, pointing over their shoulders. “Heeyyy!”

The two of them spun to look. I took advantage of the gap to swap the contents of our glasses. (With water magic...in a tenth of a second.) If Sasa had been sober, she would've seen through my ruse right away, but she was drunk enough that she didn't notice.

“Sorry, guess I was mistaken,” I said when they turned back.

“You're too drunk,” Lucy commented.

“From the top then...”

“Cheers,” we chorused, bringing our glasses together and draining them.

There was a pause.

Lucy and Sasa looked eagerly at me.

“Hey, hey, Makoto?”

“Notice anything?”

Their eyes were sparkling. However, nothing happened. After all, I hadn't drunk whatever substance was in that little bottle. I waited for a change in their own demeanors. Gradually, their faces reddened and their breathing grew ragged.

“Wh-What?”

“Hey, Lu...do you...?”

Their legs both started to give out as they fidgeted.

“What's up?” I asked in a concerned tone.

“So, Makoto. Purely hypothetically, but that wine—”

“I swapped it with both of yours,” I interrupted.

“No way!” the two cried in unison.

Their eyes went wide as they looked at each other.

“Wh-What happens now?” Lucy asked.

“I-I dunno... How are you feeling?” Sasa asked back, reaching a hand out for the other girl’s shoulder.

The two of them both yelped and shuddered.

Uh, what?

“A-Are you both okay?!” I exclaimed. “What was in that drink?!”

This seemed really bad, and I started moving toward them.

“Makoto, wait! Don’t touch us! We’re sensitive.”

“My body feels so hot... It’s like I’m tingling...”

Lucy looked as red as a boiled lobster. Sasa had faintly teary eyes...

What the hell? What’s happening?

“Lucy, Sasa, what was in that drink?” I asked again.

There was a long pause before Lucy answered. “An aphrodisiac...”

There was an equally long pause from me, and my mind seemed to stop.

“What?” I asked flatly. “A-An aphrodisiac?”

What was that for, again...

It’s for when you wanna bang, Makoto! Noah answered—utterly crudely—with a cheer.

Ah, yeah, right...

“Uh... Are both of you...okay?”

I realized that the two of them were looking at me like starving animals.

“We wanted you to initiate,” Lucy commented.

“But we can’t hold back now... Oh well.”

The two of them started crawling toward me, Lucy from the right and Sasa from the left. This was bad.

“Makoto!”

“Takatsuki!”

Both of them yelled in unison and then...leaped at me?!

D-Dodge!

I managed to slip back just before the two of them caught me.

“Mmmhh, Makoto.”

“Takatsuki...”

Lucy and Sasa held onto each other, embracing in a kiss. I guess they hadn’t realized that they’d missed their pounce.

What to do...?



You could call out to them, Noah suggested.

Yeah, but...I wasn't sure whether I wanted to get in the way of their *friendlier* relationship.

"What?! Aya?!"

"Ah! Lu?!"

Oh, looks like they'd noticed. The two of them went bright red and shifted away from each other.

"That was you?!"

"I kissed Aya?!"

"Lu, you defiled me..."

"Y-You were way more aggressive!"

The two of them calmed slightly as they moved apart. But, judging by their fidgeting, the aphrodisiac still hadn't worn off.

"How long's it last?" I asked.

"Two or three hours..."

"That's so long!"

"Hey, Makoto..." murmured Lucy.

"Takatsuki..."

The two of them turned hot gazes my way.

"I want you...though Aya's lips were soft."

"I want you...but Lu's skin was so smooth."

The two of them closed in on me again. This time, there was a big tree at my back, so I had nowhere to run.

I was soon cornered.

Makoto, you should never embarrass a lady...

Noah...I want my first time to be more romantic...!

Are you a girl or something...?

Shove off. What's the problem with that?

"Makotooo..."

"Takatsuki..."

Before I knew it, both of them were pressing in on me. They had hot looks in their eyes as they leaned in. I couldn't move—Sasa was strong to begin with, and I was even weaker than Lucy, so I wasn't going to be able to shake them off...

I guess today's the day I become an adult...

"What are you three doing?"

Someone had just arrived. She had long black hair, and pink petals were strewn amongst the strands, almost like accessories.

"Oh, the two of you are cursed."

Furiae lightly rested a hand on both of their heads. Suddenly, light came spouting from between her fingers.

After it was done, Lucy and Sasa both let out confused noises.

"You had an aphrodisiacal curse on you," said Furiae mildly. "I removed it."

Wait... So the aphrodisiac works the same way as a curse?!

Whew, saved by the curse-pro Furiae, the Priestess of the Moon.

"Umm..."

"U-Uh...?"

Lucy and Sasa seemed to deflate, both looking taken aback. They glanced at each other, then at Furiae, and at me. Finally, their faces went red, and they ran away hand in hand.

"Aya! We failed again!"

"We did! Let's not try this way again!"

"It's okay, we'll manage next time!"

“Do you think?! I think Takatsuki’ll end up angry sooner or later!”

The two of them didn’t seem even slightly regretful.

I turned to Furiae. “Thanks, Princess. You saved me.”

She stared quizzically at me. “You’re...welcome? Everyone’s heading back about now, so I came to get you.”

“Got it. Let’s go then.”

The two of us walked side by side back to the noise of the party.

The feast ended before long.

The Grandsage—who was the host—said she was leaving because she was tired. Lucy and Sasa were wasted, and Furiae said she’d escort them back to the inn. I bid my farewells to Sakurai and Fujiyan and then stayed behind to watch the flowers for a bit longer.

The sun had set, and the petals were spinning through the moonlight. I wandered for a while, deciding to take in the nighttime views. I saw someone from behind, standing alone. She had on a light dress and her hair was bluish-silver.

Princess Sophia.

What was she doing here? And without a guard...?

“Princess?” I asked.

“Oh...Hero Makoto,” she said. Her expression and voice were both cool as she turned around. “It looks like you enjoyed yourself with the girls.”

Oh...she was angry.

“I got caught up in the festivities,” I said as an excuse, then walked forward to stand next to her. I looked at her flat expression. She looked more like she was sulking than actually angry.

“Do you like the cherry blossoms?” I asked.

“No one dislikes them,” she answered. “Abel the Savior said they were his favorite.”

Huh...sounds like he had fairly Japanese tastes.

"It's tiring standing around like this. Shall we sit down?" I suggested.

"Right...let's."

There was a stone nearby that looked like it'd work as a chair, so we sat. We stayed in companionable silence for a while, watching the flowers.

"Hero Makoto...will you be returning to Roses?" Her question seemed hesitant.

"I intend to, yes."

"I had heard that you received many invitations from the nobility of Highland... Honestly, I think you could have a better life here."

Oh, that's what this was about.

"No way," I countered. "It's all kinda stuffy here. Plus, I'm an adventurer in Macallan."

"I-I see! Good!" She suddenly looked relieved. Had she thought I'd move to Highland...?

"Keep me in Roses?" I asked playfully.

"Of course! I won't give you up to anywhere else!"

Our eyes met and we laughed. Things hadn't been great when we'd first properly met in Labyrinthos, but even relationships like ours could change over time. The realization felt intense.

We chatted for a while longer, and then I felt something on my shoulder.

"Can I...rest for a while?" She had leaned her head against me. A soft, sweet scent wafted up from her.

"G-Go ahead."

My heart was pounding as we sat like one of those couples cuddling on a park bench. Should I put my arm around her shoulders? I mean, she *was* a princess, so... If I was handsome like Sakurai, I could have done it like nothing.

Just go for it!

Noah never changed.

You're such a pansy. If you ke...the... 'll...

Noah? That's weird, I was struggling to hear her.

...koto! ...hear...

Noah? Hello, Noah? Helloooo?

Nothing. I couldn't hear her at all now. Why?

"Now, now, Makoto. You shouldn't be talking to other women at a time like this."

A chill ran down my back. That was Princess Sophia's voice, but something was different, and there was just this feeling that I couldn't explain.

I looked at where the princess was resting on my shoulder and saw her staring up at me with golden eyes. The moment our gazes met, she gave me a grin I could never imagine coming from Princess Sophia's face.



“Princess?” I asked, thinking that it somehow wasn’t her. The girl in front of me had her face, but this...couldn’t be her. It had to be someone else.

She chuckled. “Correct. So, who am I?”

I gasped. Whoever it was had read my mind before answering. She’d interrupted a conversation between Noah and me, *and* she could read my mind. On top of that, if she was speaking through the Priestess of Water...

“Are you...Eir?”

“That’s riiight.”

The goddess in Princess Sophia’s body hopped off the rock and spun around, making a pose.

Where’d all that omniscience go?!

“It’s the second time we’ve met,” she commented. “Last time we were near the Seafloor Temple. Did I shock you? What do you think??? How’s it feel?”

What was *with* her? A lot of goddesses seemed slightly off...like Noah, I guess.

“That’s rude. I’m the Goddess of Water, so I can give or take *Water Magic* skills as I please!”

“Forgive me please, goddess!” I pleaded.

I was easily trapped in her web. *Mind Reading* was scary!

“Kidding, kidding, I won’t take something away that I’ve already given.” She giggled.

It was adorable and beautiful, but I couldn’t relax. And I knew why—there were absolutely no water elementals around me. They were scared of the gods.

Plus, the mana radiating from her was enough to put Lucy or the Grandsage to shame. She wasn’t even casting a spell but was simply present, and her mana still felt so strong. I guess I could understand why... After all, she was a divine being.

“Sorry for shocking you, Mako!”

She sounded easygoing, but...

I was nervous as I opened my mouth. “Not at all... What did you need with me today?”

“I came to thank you for saving Roses. Also, you were bonding with Sophie, so you get points for that too!” Princess Sophia—I mean Eir—began to dance through the petals.

“Thank you for letting me become Hero of Roses while staying Noah’s disciple.”

She giggled. “You’re a good boy. How about it, though? Maybe you could be my believer from now on! I could give you *Water Magic (Saint Rank)* right now.”

“Wha?” My mind stopped working at her offhanded suggestion.

“I control water magic. If you want, I can gift it to you.”

For...for real?

Nonono, calm down, I told myself. *There’s got to be more to it than that.*

“Don’t worry—Roses doesn’t have enough heroes. You want a strong skill, I want a strong hero, so it’s a win-win.”

“And what’s the condition?”

“That you become my disciple.”

“And...stop being Noah’s?”

“Yup. Then you get a saint rank skill. Not bad, is it?”

That was incredible. Saint rank was said to be the pinnacle that humanity could reach, while god ranks were only attainable if you gave up that humanity.

Saint rank... I wanted a skill like that.

Will you receive the gift of *Water Magic (Saint Rank)* and become the Goddess of Water’s disciple?

Yes

No

RPG Player had given me an option. The sound of me swallowing was super loud in my ears. I had to answer.

I flashed back to the painful memory of being left behind at the Water Temple.

I remembered the people abandoning me...all of it flitting through a corner of my mind.

Turns out, my answer was never in question.

"I'm Noah's disciple, now and forever," I stated.

"Ack, shot down!" Eir smiled though, not seeming too unhappy about it. Then, she snapped her fingers.

M-Makoto! You're still my disciple?! That's great! I love you! That bitch, trying to steal my Makoto!

Noah's voice was back.

"You've got such a good kid as your disciple. I'm jealous."

Go die in a ditch! I'll remember this when you come to the temple next! Noah yelled at her.

"Calm down, I'll bring a bunch of stuff. We can play *Momotetsu*," Eir answered in amusement.

So they could play video games...that's cool.

I half-listened to their conversation, but I was pretty sure that Eir was done talking to me. I'd need to take Princess Sophia back to her room eventually.

Then, Noah spoke up like she'd just remembered something.

Oh, Eir, you had something to say to Makoto, right?

Hm? She wasn't done yet?

"Right, right. Mako, this is important."

She really wasn't done?! The stuff from earlier had already hit me hard.

"Wh-What is it?" I stuttered.

"Listen up, Mako," she said, her voice turning serious.

“At this rate, Roses will fall.”

Those words...had been a revelation about the demise of Roses.

Afterword

I'm Isle Osaki. Thank you for buying volume four of *Zero Believers*. This book was the Highland arc. When I was writing the first book, I was really aware of the climax from the first half of this volume.

I wanted to have a lot of Makoto's classmates back on the page as a sort of school reunion type thing, but there were too many of them, so I had to cut the numbers down.

Furiae, the Priestess of the Moon, took center stage in this volume. She was originally going to be the main heroine of the series, and back when I wrote the web version, she was there from the first chapter. However, her past was too much and made the series too dark, so I gave that plan up. Lucy, with how bright she is, was a contrast to her. Afterward, we got more heroines with Sasa and Princess Sophia, so Furiae didn't show up until volume four. I was so relieved to get her on the page for this volume.

※ Noah is the eternal, undying, zeroth heroine.

Finally, I want to thank Tam-U for the ever-wonderful illustrations, along with my editors Y and N. I also want to thank the readers that have supported both the online and published versions of this series. I hope you can continue to do so in the future as well.

Full clearing
Another World
under a
GODDESS
with Zero
Believers

4

Death-Shrouded Priestess of a Ruined Land

Story
Isle Osaki

Art
Tam-U

Noah

"CUTE,
RIGHT?"







BATHED
IN THE
MOONLIGHT,
THE GIRL
LOOKED LIKE
A BEAUTIFUL
GHOST.

THAT WAS
THE FIRST
DESCRIPTION
I THOUGHT OF
WHEN I SAW
HER FROM A
DISTANCE.

Furiae

Bonus Short Stories

Chat with a Goddess (Volume 4)

“Hello,” I called out. I’d come to consciousness in the goddess’s space. That was fine, but...

“Oh...Makoto.”

She...didn’t look great.

“Uh, Noah? What’s wrong?”

She was slumped back into the sofa. Wait, she had a sofa?

“Are you not feeling well?” I asked.

“Mhmm. I spent all night drinking with Eir and then crashed...”

“With Eir?!”

Eir was, of course, the Water Goddess and the guardian deity of Roses.

“She came here?”

“Yeah. She does from time to time. The Seafloor Temple *is* technically a shrine under her dominion.”

“O-Oh...”

I’d been more surprised about the fact that a Sacred Deity like Eir would crack open a cold one with Noah, one of the ancient goddesses... Then again, Eir *had* approved of me becoming the State-Authorized Hero of Roses, so I guess she and Noah must be on fairly good terms. Certain groups of deities might be natural enemies on the whole, but maybe individuals within those groups could have good relationships...?

“Makoto...get me water.”

“R-Right...”

A glance at the table revealed several empty bottles. I picked up a pitcher that sat among the empties and poured out some water into a glass.

“Here.” I offered her the water.

“Mmm, thanks. Also, give me a massage.”

“R-Right...”

She certainly didn’t ask for *much*, did she?

Her lolling position also put her defenseless back on full display. My heart pounded at the sight of her skin—so pale it almost gleamed—as I massaged.

“Get my hips too?”

I paused for a moment. “I don’t know how.”

“Just do whatever.”

W-Well then. I channeled some memories I had of a massage place I’d seen on TV and started pushing down on her hips.

“Ahhh, that’s the spot... You’re good at this, aren’t you?”

I let out a sigh. Why did I feel like a kid getting roped into giving his gran a massage?

“Who are you calling a granny?!”

“Slip of the tongue,” I defended, even though I hadn’t actually said it. She was reading my thoughts, so I couldn’t let careless comparisons cross my mind.

I spent some time doing my best on that front—or back—before I had a sudden thought.

“Um...is this what you called me here for?”

“Is that...bad?”

“Eh, I don’t mind.” After all, wasn’t caring for your goddess part of a disciple’s duties?

Although, this did feel like a bit of a letdown... After all, she wanted me to clean up after another goddess drank her under the table.

“I’m surprised Eir’s such a heavyweight,” I commented.

“Well, Roses does a lot of brewing.”

She was right—even Macallan, where I lived, was known for its spirits. There were plenty of other famous distilleries in the country as well. Eir’s followers probably gave offerings of alcohol, so I could understand her becoming a heavyweight.

I let my mind wander pointlessly along those lines while I kept up the massage.

“Right!” Noah said. “Eir gets good drink from her believers, then goes ‘this is the best in ten years,’ even though she said the same thing last year.”

“So it’s like Beaujolais nouveau?” I wondered. I guess there was a similar market even in this world.

“It just makes me feel like I *have* to drink it, you know?!”

“I get where you’re coming from.”

“Right?!”

I let her complaints drift by me and focused on being in the moment. Though I might be a disciple of a wicked deity planning to overthrow the world, these calm, relaxing periods were still great.

“Hey, give me another glass,” she demanded. “Bring it up to my mouth this time.”

“Sure, sure,” I answered with a half smile.

And so, I spent my sleeping hours with my revered goddess, until my dream came to an end. It was a good use of time...I think.

Conversation between the Priestess of the Moon, the Hero of Roses, and the Grandsage

◇ Furiae’s Perspective ◇

Hundreds of butterflies were fluttering through the air, all made entirely out of water.

My knight is practicing again.

Makoto Takatsuki had been the guardian knight of the Priestess of the Moon (me) for several days now. This was a sight I'd gotten used to.

If my knight had free time, he would be training. Didn't he ever get tired of it?

The mage had trained with him, but she'd dropped out after three hours, saying she couldn't practice anymore. The warrior had said she would prepare dinner, so she must have been in the kitchen.

I watched him as he trained tirelessly.

"Is the elementalist always like this?"

"Yes he is," I answered automatically. But then, I reeled and whipped around. "What?!"

I hadn't noticed the young girl appear next to me. She was white-haired and red-eyed and was wearing a white robe. In truth, she looked adorable, but the mana coming off of her felt overpowering.

I knew her.

Th-The White Grandsage...

She was rumored to be the strongest mage on the continent. So why was she *here?*

"Did you need something, Grandsage?" my knight asked without turning away from his practice.

You know you're not even looking over here...right?

"Indeed," the Grandsage answered. "I'm rather peckish. You will be returning to Roses soon, correct?"

"What am I, a snack?" he asked. "I am, though, yes."

"Hmm. Then come to Highland Castle tomorrow. I will show you a nice place."

"Where?"

"The Millennium Cherry Tree Gardens," replied the Grandsage. "It was Abel's favorite place a thousand years ago."

"Oh!" my knight exclaimed. "I'd love to see them!"

Makoto Takatsuki is excited about the offer. I don't think I've ever seen him so enthused. He was usually so calm.

"You are rather childish, my knight," I commented.

"Am I?"

"That reminds me," the Grandsage said thoughtfully, "you became her guardian knight. Enjoying yourself?"

My knight seemed taken aback. "A-Am I enjoying myself...?"

For me, our contract was simply a way to escape Symphonia. It was likely the same for him—a partnership of convenience and a means to an end. He had only become my knight to protect the capital from revolt.

There was no way he could find it pleasant.

"Hmm, well I really wanted a *Dark Magic* skill, but I ended up with *Charm*. Still, I'm having fun learning new techniques."

Or...apparently, he didn't mind. Did he enjoy being contracted to someone like me? Someone called a cursed priestess?

He was a strange one.

"Well then..." The Grandsage approached my knight. "I'll be taking my portion now."

What did she mean...

"Wha?"

As I watched, she bit into his neck. I stared, dumbfounded.

"H-Hang on!" I stammered. I could hear her throat pulse as she swallowed. "Wh-What are you doing?!"

"Princess, keep quiet during meal times," scolded my knight.

"Silence, girly," mumbled the Grandsage.

Was I the only one who thought this was weird?! Why was my knight just carrying on as usual?!

I could only watch as the Grandsage clung to my knight and drank his blood.

She finished up before long and excused herself, healing his wounds with a lick and then leaving via teleport.

Later, I would find out that she'd taken a liking to my knight's blood. His complexion hadn't changed even as he was drained...

What in the world?

"So...how long are you going to train?" I asked.

"Hmm...until bedtime, I guess."

"Right."

As always, he didn't turn to look my way as he answered.

Weird.

My guardian knight was...odd. He didn't dislike me, nor did he show interest—he just did his own thing... I'd never met anyone like him before.

Somehow, I found it to be rather pleasant.

Girl Talk Between Princess Sophia and Princess Noelle

◇ Princess Sophia's Perspective ◇

"Your tie's crooked, Takatsuki."

"Thanks, Sasa."

"Hey, Makoto, let's go train over here."

"Sure."

"Luuuu, you two don't need to go train *alone*, do you?"

"Aya, you tried to kiss him when you straightened his tie, didn't you?"

The two girls glared at each other from close range. In other words, it was the same sight as always.

"My knight, I wish to go shopping. Come with me." Furiae began pulling him by the arm.

"Right, right," he answered.

“No fair, Fuu!”

“Fuuri! Wait your turn!”

“Uh...turn? We’ll be right back...?”

Three beauties were all fawning over him... It used to be just two, but yet again, another had been added.

Ugh. Maybe I should join them. I had duties to attend to, though...

“Lady Sophia, your next appointment,” my subordinate announced.

“I know!”

So, with precious little choice, I parted from Hero Makoto.



“That’s what happened,” I finished. “There are more and more girls around him all the time, Lady Noelle.”

“You do not have it easy, Sophia.”

Once my official duties in the castle had been dealt with, Lady Noelle had invited me to her private room.

I sighed as we sipped tea together.

Then, there came a knock at the door, followed immediately by someone entering.

“Hey, Noelle... Oh, Princess Sophia is with you?” Ryousuke Sakurai—the Hero of Light—was the one who’d barged in. “I’ll come back later.”

“You need not worry,” I said. “I was just about to leave.”

He was her fiancé, so I wanted to defer to his presence here.

“No, please—Sophia, Ryousuke, both of you stay.”

We both looked quizzically at Lady Noelle as she grinned.



“That is how things went,” I said. I’d explained the earlier events again, this time to Sir Ryousuke.

“I see. There are a lot of girls around Takatsuki...” He looked oddly conflicted. I seemed to remember that the Priestess of the Moon was rather friendly with him as well.

Perhaps he hadn’t particularly enjoyed hearing about her giving attention to another hero.

“You’re a good friend of his, no?” Noelle asked. “Do you have any advice you can give Sophia?”

Oh! He had known Makoto Takatsuki for quite some time. I’d be interested to hear what he had to say.

“Right,” he began. “Well, the first thing you need to know about Takatsuki is...”

Once he started, he just didn’t stop... By the time Noelle had gotten his attention again, he was recalling tales of their childhood, when he and Hero Makoto had been thirteen.

Was he *ever* going to stop reminiscing?! Also, he seemed a bit *too* fond of him.

Even Princess Noelle appeared to be taken aback, and she’d been the one to bring the topic up.

“Oh, right. I *do* know an interesting thing about him,” he remarked.

“Wh-What is it?” And how long would this particular story take?

“I can’t remember exactly when it was, but one of the girls in our class used to like him.”

“Oh?” Hmm, that *did* sound interesting.

Hero Makoto once told me that he’d had no partner in his old world, so I waited to hear where this was going.

“I only found out after, but he was interested in her too, so their feelings were mutual.”

“Oh, he’s quite the smooth one, then,” Princess Noelle said. She seemed equally as interested. “So what happened with them?”

“Well, my friends and I tried everything to get them together...”

It must not have gone well...

“Everyone knew she liked him...everyone except Takatsuki.”

What...? I seem to remember him saying that there were thirty students in each class, so...

“That is...impressively dense.” Princess Noelle’s voice was filled with exasperation.

“I’m not sure I’d call it dense, per se... Takatsuki just doesn’t seem like he’d really recognize those types of feelings without someone clearly telling him.”

“It has to be verbalized?” I asked.

“That seems somewhat bothersome,” said Noelle.

That might be important, though... After all, lots of the women around him were the type to be completely open with their feelings.

After that, I bid farewell and left the room.



On my way back to my lodging, I came across Hero Makoto training his *Water Magic* along with Lucy and Aya.

They weren’t...*flirting*, but it wasn’t nice to see.

I remembered Sir Sakurai’s comments.

He just won’t get it unless you say it clearly.

“Hero Makoto.”

“Oh, Sophia, what’s up?” he replied.

“I like you,” I told him. That was...rather embarrassing to put into words.

He and the two girls looked at me in wide-eyed shock.

“Umm...me too...?” he replied.

So he had clearly understood me. I was treated to the rare sight of him looking utterly bewildered.

At that, I was satisfied.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue: The Story of a Princess and Her Knight](#)

[Chapter 1: Makoto Takatsuki Heads for Highland](#)

[Chapter 2: Makoto Takatsuki Reunites with the Grandsage](#)

[Chapter 3: Makoto Takatsuki Explores the Capital](#)

[Chapter 4: Makoto Takatsuki Takes His Goddess's Advice](#)

[Chapter 5: Makoto Takatsuki Is Called to Highland Castle](#)

[Chapter 6: Makoto Takatsuki Meets the Priestess of the Moon](#)

[Chapter 7: Makoto Takatsuki Guards the Capital](#)

[Chapter 8: Makoto Takatsuki Realizes His Own Power](#)

[Epilogue: Under the Millennium Cherry Trees](#)

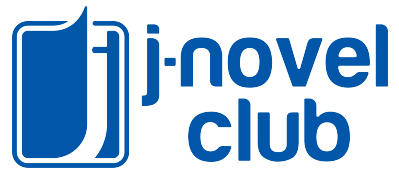
[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 5 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

Full Clearing Another World under a Goddess with Zero Believers: Volume 4

by Isle Osaki

Translated by MPT

Edited by C.D. Leeson

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2020 Isle Osaki Illustrations by Tam-U

Cover illustration by Tam-U

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by OVERLAP, Inc.

This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo
English translation © 2022 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: August 2022

Premium E-Book